AMERICAN GIRLS

ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY INTO THE ISLAMIC STATE *and* HER SISTER'S FIGHT TO BRING HER HOME

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For my own sisters: Ali, Maddie, and Charlotte

Author’s Note

American Girls is based on extensive interviews with Samantha and Lori Sally conducted over the course of three years, as well as with their friends, family, colleagues, and associates. Portions of this story, particularly Sam’s time living under the Islamic State, have been reconstructed with the help of a diary she wrote after escaping ISIS. While I have no reason to doubt the historical details provided in the diary, because it was created after the fact, it may provide a favorable gloss of Sam’s feelings and motivations. I’ve noted when those motivations differ from other accounts, or where Sam’s account is the only one available.

Quotation marks indicate direct quotes from interviews, primary source materials, or recollections of conversations by interviewees, whereas conversations without quotation marks have been reconstructed from my notes. Lori provided access to her diary and personal home computer, the hard drive of which included audio recordings, videos, documents, and photos from the time Sam was in Syria. The names of certain people involved in this story have been changed to protect their privacy.

I also made three on-the-ground reporting trips to Iraq to conduct in-person interviews with the Yezidi children who lived with Sam during her time in Syria, and to meet with experts who work directly with women and children recovering from living under ISIS. On four separate trips to Indiana, I met with sources, attended court hearings, and spent time in Elkhart mapping out the details of Sam and Lori’s lives there. The book also relies heavily on court documents, research and interviews with multiple extremism experts, and clinical studies on mental health and psychology. A full list of sources can be found at the end of the book.

Prologue

APRIL 2015
SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE OF RAQQA, SYRIA

Samantha Sally stood on the edge of an olive grove on the border between Turkey and Syria, watching her husband sprint away into the inky black. On his hip he held their toddler daughter, and on his back, a knapsack with Sam's American passport and their life savings. Within seconds she could no longer make out their shadows against the vast expanse of darkness. A refrain rang in her head: "I will never see them again."

It was as if Sam was underwater, observing everything in silent slow motion. If she could just retrieve her daughter, she thought, they could cross back into Turkey, no problem. They could go home to Indiana. She took a few steps. Her husband was yelling at her to hurry up and she started to move more quickly, following his voice through the black night. She stumbled over rocks and weeds, running blindly. "Let me just catch up with them, then I'll figure out what to do," she decided. If it was this easy to cross into Syria, how hard could it be to come back?

Sam's husband, Moussa, was running toward Raqqa, then the headquarters of the Islamic State. By the time he and Sam stood on that border in the spring of 2015, ISIS had become a self-declared worldwide Caliphate, battling for territory in Iraq and Syria and churning out online propaganda to attract fighters like Moussa with promises of wealth, women, and eventually paradise in heaven. Sam and Moussa had met in a small city in Indiana, introduced by Sam's sister, Lori, who was married to Moussa's brother. Back then, she never could have imagined that this was where her life with him would take her; Raqqa was a long way away from Elkhart, Indiana, and from the little town in Arkansas where she and Lori grew up as Jehovah's Witnesses girls.

I first encountered Sam and Lori's story in March 2019, when I was working on a piece for *ELLE* magazine about the two sisters: Sam, who crossed the border to Syria with her jihadi husband, and Lori, who did everything in her power to get her safely back home. Back then, I'd thought Sam's case was a simple tale of religious radicalization, but it didn't take long to realize it was about so much more. How does a young mother from Arkansas, a woman who used to go barhopping and listen to DMX and post

raunchy Facebook memes, end up running into a war zone halfway across the world? How do you grow up in the middle of the United States of America, surrounded by Walmarts and happy hours and football games, and end up living in Syria under a murderous militant group?

Later, Sam claimed that it was that moment on the border when everything changed: when she finally understood that her husband had radicalized, that he was joining ISIS, and that he was taking their young daughter with him. By then, there was no one left to corroborate her story, and so she could tell it whatever way she liked, braiding truth and lies together until they were indistinguishable from each other. In her version, Sam was a hapless victim, powerless to the ways in which her husband controlled her, a mother forced to make an impossible choice. Like most lies, it was partially true. But even Lori, who quit her job to devote herself to bringing Sam back to the United States, was never completely convinced.

Women follow their husbands' commands for all kinds of reasons, even when they know they shouldn't. Sometimes, the danger accumulates so slowly as if to be imperceptible. If that's what happened back in Indiana—a gradual accommodation of her husband Moussa's control, violence, and finally extremism—on this night, on the Syrian border, everything moved too quickly. Moussa had plunged them into chaos, and amid that chaos Sam lost her ability to think.

By the time he did the thing that finally jolted her fully into reality—by the time he grabbed their two-year-old and started running with her across the border—it was too late. No sudden realization of the danger she faced, no second thoughts about bringing a toddler into a war zone, no doubts about exchanging the US for an Islamic State stronghold would have given Sam the ability to change her mind and make a different decision. The accumulation of bad choices had led her to this moment, where she had no choice at all. Sam was going to Syria. And so were her children.

Lori and Sam grew up in the same house, lived in the same cities, and married a pair of brothers. Sam made some mistakes; Lori made mistakes, too. Sam's happened to be colossal mistakes, and with the wrong guy. But could it have happened to Lori? Could it have happened to anyone?

Chapter One

Samantha Sally was fresh out of a bad marriage when she met Chris Hammer at the Route 66 car rally near Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was the summer of 2004 and she was nineteen years old. George W. Bush was on his way to reelection and Mark Zuckerberg had just launched Facebook from his dorm and "If I Ain't Got You" by Alicia Keys was being belted from every teen bedroom across America. Sam was living with her parents and younger sister in backwater Oklahoma, desperate to escape. Richard and Lisa Sally had raised Sam and her sister, Lori, in nearby Arkansas as devout Jehovah's Witnesses, a millenarian Christian denomination that believes in an impending Armageddon and rejects most earthly pleasures, like holidays and pop culture. The problem for Sam and Lori was that they *liked* earthly pleasures—Gorillaz, *Titanic*, birthday parties—and they didn't want to live in the lusterless version of the world in which their parents had raised them.

The sisters had come to the realization over the past few years that the Jehovah's Witness teachings of their childhood weren't for them. Sam had tried to leave the religion once, when she was sixteen, for a marriage to a non-Witness man named Robert. But the relationship ended violently, and it was only a couple of years before she ended up back where she started, stuck with her sister and her overzealous parents in a forest-green log cabin in a remote area of Oklahoma. Though they were young, both sisters had already endured a series of bad relationships: Sam with her ex-husband, Robert, who was violent and abusive, and Lori with an ex-con who'd gotten her pregnant. Now the two were sharing a room at their parents' house while Lori waitressed at Denny's and Sam stayed home. Sam was seeking a new way out—and Lori, younger by thirteen months and eleven days, was ready to go with her.

Chris was 6'5" and broad, with dark blond hair and an easy smile. He was a few years older than Sam, twenty-three, and had a steady job as an account manager at White Cap, a national construction material supplier. Like Sam, he hailed from Arkansas, and the two shared certain pleasures, like racing cars and drinking cans of Bud and blasting country rock. Chris was outgoing and made friends wherever he went, but he was also sweet and inexperienced—a departure from the kind of guys Sam usually dated.

He was laid-back and easygoing, and in Sam he saw a breezy confidence that he found both attractive and terrifying.

From the moment their mutual friend Cody introduced them at the racetrack, Sam knew she'd reel Chris in. Sam was beautiful—pale-faced, with round, denim-blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and a bow-shaped mouth—and quick with a comeback or sarcastic comment. She was feminine but not girly; though her personal style veered tomboy, she took great care with her appearance, always lining her eyes with dark pencil. There were some men in whom she could cultivate an almost desperate sense of desire, a desire that blinded them to the ways in which she could be cunning and manipulative. Sam's flirtatiousness and innate charm, her ability to seem simultaneously wounded and tough, the way she could make you feel like you were the only person in the room: These qualities were potent aphrodisiacs for men like Chris, who found themselves wanting to save her without realizing Sam would never let herself be saved. In Chris, the desire to please Sam was so strong that not long after they met, he sold his prized race car to buy her a Honda CBR600RR motorcycle.

Chris lived in Springdale, a small industrial city in the northwest corner of Arkansas that serves as the world headquarters for Tyson Foods. Even if, like Chris, you didn't work at a Tyson plant, which the majority of the city's residents did, the company's influence was evident everywhere you turned: The school was the Helen Tyson Middle School and the highway was the Don Tyson Parkway and the park was the Randal Tyson Recreational Complex. Even the air—especially downtown near the poultry farms—carried the slight scent of chicken shit. The city, Arkansas's fourth largest, was at the time in the midst of a population boom, driven primarily by its abundance of blue- and white-collar jobs. A significant portion of the new population were Spanish-speaking immigrants who flocked to the area for work at companies like Walmart and Tyson. The city was much more diverse than other parts of Arkansas, and its proximity to the University of Arkansas, only twenty minutes away by car, meant it was home to a handful of academics and white-collar workers.

Springdale was only fifteen minutes from where Sam and Lori had grown up in a little Arkansas town called Lowell. Lowell was tiny, less than ten square miles, and nestled along the old St. Louis–San Francisco Railway on a plateau in the Ozark Mountains. Five thousand mostly white residents lived in split-levels and farmhouses separated by rolling pastures,

on streets with names like Cow Face Road and Apple Blossom Avenue. The town itself was run-down but the nature that surrounded it was immense and breathtaking; Lowell is on the edge of Arkansas's largest state park, packed with hiking trails, shooting ranges, campsites, and lakes. The Sally family's small farm (or lot), where the girls lived with their parents until their late teens, occupied more than an acre of flat grasslands fed from the east by the snaking White River. The farm sat at the end of a dead-end road, which during rainstorms had been so notoriously treacherous to travel down that the homesteaders who settled there in the 1840s nicknamed it Mudtown Road. Sam and Lori grew up digging for snakes in that mud, the mud that trapped mail-carrying stagecoaches and stuck to Confederate soldiers' boots during the Civil War, and later, when the J.B. Hunt Trucking Company relocated its headquarters to Lowell in 1969, the mud that caught and hardened in the wheels of their father's truck.

Their father, Richard, was a long-haul driver and their mother, Lisa, worked long hours as an office secretary, so the Sally sisters were left to their own devices for the majority of their childhood, tasked with feeding themselves and getting themselves to and from school. On the rare occasions Richard was home, Sam liked to help him work on the truck, throwing on a pair of too-big Carhartt overalls, eagerly fetching his tools or tagging along to the auto-parts store. Richard was six-foot and burly, and when they were kids he'd had a dark full beard, a mustache, and the shaggy black hair of the Cherokee and Seneca ancestors that made up part of his lineage. Lori and Sam used to call him "the Gorilla," but his friends just called him "Blackie." Lisa, by contrast, was reserved and quiet, prone to crying spells set off by domestic inconveniences like a lost sock or a dirty plate left in the sink. She'd been raised to put her husband first: It was Richard's needs she was primarily there to serve, and her devotion made him ferociously protective. They never fought, especially in front of Sam and Lori, who grew up thinking marriages never had arguments. If they did, they were resolved in secret, with the woman submitting to the man.

As kids, the sisters would go hiking or possum hunting with their cousins, who were also Witnesses, and on days when it rained, Lori—much quieter and more studious by nature—would curl up on the floor with a book, while Sam watched the few movies her parents allowed. She loved *Wishbone* and *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* and *The Lion King*, and her favorite was *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the 1962 western starring John Wayne and

James Stewart. But even the most innocent-seeming entertainment could prove problematic in the Sally household. Once, when the girls were in elementary school, their mother Lisa became so worried the house was being haunted by a demon that she called the local church elders to come inspect it. When the men arrived they tore through all the family's books and movies before they settled on the source of the evil: an old VHS copy of *Dances with Wolves*, and one of *Field of Dreams*. "You have to burn these movies," they told her, apparently not fans of Kevin Costner. "Then you'll get rid of the demons."

Demons, wickedness, the end of the world—it all loomed large in the Sally sisters' childhoods. Earthly happenings seemed to concern their Jehovah's Witness community only when they affected the afterlife. Their day-to-day lives were simply meant to be endured until the battle of Armageddon. According to the Pew Research Center, 79 percent of Christians believe in the second coming of Christ, but four in five Christians don't believe that coming will happen in their lifetime. For Jehovah's Witnesses like the Sallys, however, Armageddon can happen at any moment. Until then, life was essentially a waiting game that felt at once impossibly urgent—*the world could literally end at any second*—and frustratingly stagnant—*yeah, but it hasn't yet*. As the Sally parents saw it, the only thing worth doing in a world facing certain doom was warning other people of that doom, so they spent much of their time preaching to their neighbors. The other kids in their town, mostly your run-of-the-mill Evangelicals, were allowed to participate in extracurricular activities and academic pursuits, but the Sally sisters were sequestered from all that, discouraged by their mother from even doing homework, as it distracted from proselytizing.

As kids, the sisters spent several hours each week worshipping at the Springdale Kingdom Hall, a squat brick building just a short drive down Route 265 from their farmhouse. There are more than 8.5 million Witnesses worldwide, but the Sallys were one of only a handful of Witness families in Arkansas, where less than 1 percent of residents identify as Witnesses and the vast majority are Evangelical Christian. Every Sunday a public speaker would deliver a lecture based on scripture, followed by a discussion of an article chosen by the elders from the *Watchtower* magazine. Sam and Lori would sit beside their mother, Lisa, in straight-backed chairs upholstered in brown wool, and Sam, who was always less interested in religion than her

sister, would try not to squirm with boredom as congregants discussed the upcoming Armageddon, a final war between human governments and God predicted by the New Testament. When that final battle was over, the Witnesses believed, God would prevail and the earth would be cleansed of nonbelievers. Jesus Christ would descend from heaven to create a heaven on earth for Witnesses, who would be granted immortality. Since 1914, the Witnesses believe, humanity has been living in the "last days," but—after a series of failed predictions of Armageddon's arrival—they now believe that it's impossible to predict exactly *when* Armageddon will come and the last days will end.

Most children think about death as something far-off, a distant horror that can be buried under the immediacy of the present, but for the Sally family, death was happening now, all around them all the time, and if you didn't follow the words of the elders, you would never make it to Paradise.

Chris lived in a brick duplex in Springdale with three bedrooms, a full garage, and a private backyard; not long after he met Sam at the rally race, he agreed to let her move in. A few months afterward, Lori began staying some nights at Chris's as well; he had an extra bedroom, and being with her sister and her boyfriend was a welcome escape from the confines of her parents' house. Sam got a part-time job at the White Cap where Chris worked, and Lori started working the overnight shift at Walmart in Bentonville, splitting her time between her parents' house and Chris's. She paid rent and helped keep the place clean, so Sam and Chris were happy to have her.

Sam had stopped attending Witness services when she was sixteen, and Lori followed suit a year or two later. To Sam, who'd never really bought into the doom and gloom of her parents' religion, it was almost a nonevent, but Lori had been a true believer, so losing her faith affected her tremendously. The two sisters were excommunicated from the congregation —officially known as "disfellowshipping" in the Witness faith, a punishment based on a verse from Corinthians that reads, "Stop keeping company with anyone called a brother who is sexually immoral or a greedy person or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner, not even eating with such a man." Their congregation was informed at its weekly meeting that first Sam, and then Lori, were no longer Witnesses, and as such were to be shunned by their community. According to Witness

literature, Lisa and Richard weren't even supposed to say hello to their daughters, because "a simple 'Hello' to someone can be the first step that develops into a conversation and maybe even a friendship. Would we want to take that first step with a disfellowshipped person?" Despite these rules, Lisa maintained a cordial relationship with her daughters, though always secretly, so that she herself didn't risk being disfellowshipped.

Once the sisters moved in with Chris in Springdale, he and Sam started throwing parties almost every night at the duplex, but since Lori worked the night shift, she usually skipped them. When she did attend, she usually only drank a beer or two before retreating to her room. Sam easily ingratiated herself with Chris's friends from the racing world, but Lori found it hard to relate to them. She wasn't good at making small talk, and she didn't have Sam's innate social grace—being around other people often left her exhausted. Ever since Sam had left to be with her first husband, Robert, when Sam was sixteen, Lori felt like Sam had put a wall up between them. Sam loved Lori, but she didn't want her being the third wheel all the time. She was embarrassed by Lori's lack of social skills—her sister talked too much at the wrong time and not enough when it was called for. Sam also felt that Lori was jealous of her, especially of the fact that she had a boyfriend. When they were children, the Sally sisters seemed built to function as a complementary pair: One sister's strength was the other sister's weakness. But the older they got, the more their differences seemed like a burden instead of a balm, as if they were two magnets turned against each other, attracting and repelling in equal measure.

Lori, for her part, was grateful to Chris for letting her stay with them—it was certainly a better living situation than staying with her restrictive parents full-time, who since her disfellowshipping barely spoke to her except to enforce their archaic rules—but she often wished she could afford her own place. Usually she spent her meager time off working on crochet projects, experimenting with new hair colors, or going for long walks. Lori felt lost. Even though she had disavowed many tenets of the Witness faith, she was still deeply influenced by the effects of her religious upbringing, whether she wanted to be or not. Lori felt guilty that she'd been disfellowshipped and believed that her parents were good Christian folk, and she was an inherently evil person who didn't deserve stability and happiness. She wasn't sure, yet, what exactly it was that she wanted in life,

but she felt like she had already failed to become the person she'd been raised to be: a God-fearing Witness wife and mother.

Chris knew about the sisters' religious past, but to him it was only outwardly evident in Lori. He had trouble relating to her and found her clueless, socially awkward, and eager to please, but with no idea how. Chris had let Lori move in for help with the rent, and to please Sam, but the two weren't really friends. Sam had told him once that she thought Lori was the pretty one, but Chris didn't see it. Mostly he considered Lori to be Sam's awkward little sister, and though the two seemed to genuinely love each other, it seemed like Lori was living her life in Sam's shadow. He thought maybe Lori resented Sam for how easily things came to her. But even though Sam appeared confident, she suffered from low self-esteem and self-doubt and constantly sought approval and validation from others, her loyalty always seeming to lie with whoever complimented her last.

On weekends the sisters enjoyed drag racing on the backroads of Arkansas, reveling in the feeling of being free from their parents' rules. Sam had always loved racing, and Lori got into it because of her. One day after the two had gone shopping and were heading back to Chris's house, Sam proposed a race—Lori in her Hyundai sedan, and Sam on her motorcycle. Lori took an unexpected detour and beat Sam through a light. Sam was incensed; she sped up to over 100 mph and blew through the next green, but by the time she reached the following intersection the light had turned red. Sam was going too fast to stop, so she panicked and laid her bike down across the intersection as Lori, behind her, watched in horror. Sam skidded across moving traffic, her head barely missing the metal crossbar of a dump truck, and miraculously slid through to the other side unscathed, finishing by heroically standing her motorcycle up like she was the star of a *Fast and Furious* movie. Slowly she used her shaking hands to peel off her helmet as Lori pulled up beside her in her Hyundai, screaming and crying. The sisters were breathless, pumped full of adrenaline. "Don't ever do that again!" Lori screamed, the two of them laughing maniacally.

Sam was like that—impulsive, stubborn, and as reckless with her body as a teenage football player. In Springdale that summer, she was feeling especially brash, keen to outrun the mounting troubles and disappointments she'd accumulated ever since she'd gotten married three years earlier. Her now ex-husband, Robert, was nineteen when they first met in an internet chatroom, and Sam was sixteen, temping part-time as a receptionist at the

air-conditioning company where her mother worked. He was broad-shouldered and short—only an inch or two taller than Sam—with a mouth that turned down at the sides and a freckle beside his nose. He lived in Indiana, an eight-hour drive through the Ozarks from the Sallys' home in Lowell. Sam had never been to Indiana, but to her, a girl who had never lived outside of the four contiguous states of Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Texas, it must've sounded exotic. Indiana was close to St. Louis, and not that far from Chicago, but most importantly it was not Lowell, where she was feeling increasingly suffocated by her parents' rules.

Back then, Sam had thought it was Robert who would be her savior, a ticket to a new life. Marrying him at only sixteen had meant she'd been officially disfellowshipped from the church, so no more weekly trips to the Kingdom Hall, or forced proselytizing, or arcane rules about what music she could listen to. But Robert was cruel—a predator, really, who became abusive not long after they started dating. He was a nineteen-year-old ex-sailor who found Sam, a vulnerable teenage girl, on the internet. Chris, by contrast, had no temper and was happy to just go with the flow. He was so *nice*, Sam thought, but the trouble with niceness is that it is also, sometimes, boring. Even after what she'd been through with Robert, Sam was looking for adventure, for another thrill-seeker—she was young, after all, and just starting her adult life. She didn't crave stability the way her sister, Lori, did; often when she found it she moved on before it could really take root.

Though Sam was the one with more dating experience, eighteen-year-old Lori had also become intimately acquainted with the unique cruelty of which some men were capable. In elementary school, she and Sam had been sexually abused by a family member. The sisters didn't tell their parents what happened, fearing that Lisa and Richard would take the matter to the church elders instead of the police. Jehovah's Witnesses have a "Two Witness Rule" established by the congregational judicial policy and based on chapter 19, verse 15 in the Book of Deuteronomy: If the accused has not confessed to the crime, at least two witnesses—both Jehovah's Witnesses—are needed to corroborate that the crime occurred. This can make child sexual abuse, to which there are rarely ever two witnesses, especially hard to tackle. If a member of the congregation is somehow found to have committed child abuse, the Watchtower Society—the Jehovah's Witnesses' main governing body—has a peculiar process for reporting. Local elders are instructed to write a report answering twelve specific questions, such as

“Does anybody else know about the abuse?” and “Did the abuse happen more than once?” and mail it in a blue envelope to Watchtower headquarters in New York. Sometimes the Society will suggest a specific punishment for a perpetrator—typically temporary shunning, or extra Bible study.

Over the last few decades, lawsuits filed against the Watchtower Society across the globe have revealed a long history of sexual abuse allegations, resulting in millions of dollars being paid to complainants as part of settlements. As kids, Sam and Lori saw these dynamics play out in their own family when one of their family members accused her husband of sexually abusing their child. But the local elders vouched for her husband’s character and told her that she couldn’t possibly be telling the truth. Their family member was eventually shunned by the family and the congregation, and Sam and Lori didn’t see her again until they were adults. As kids and young adults, the sisters didn’t want the same thing to happen to them, so they kept the secret, not talking about it even with each other until their early twenties. Even then Sam was cagey about the abuse depending on her mood, sometimes talking openly with Lori about it, and sometimes denying it happened altogether. Pretending it never happened was easier than admitting that it had, and it had changed her, whether she acknowledged it or not.

As accusations of sexual abuse against Jehovah’s Witness elders were cropping up in communities across the country, throughout the ’60s and ’70s, the nation was in the midst of an awakening about the existence and frequency of child sexual abuse. In 1962, pediatrician Henry Kempe published “The Battered Child Syndrome,” a research paper that outlined the symptoms and impact of child sexual abuse. The paper, for which he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, helped establish child sexual abuse as a growing concern within the medical community, and spurred state and federal governments to enact a host of laws aimed at protecting children from mistreatment throughout the ’70s. But despite increasing public awareness around the issue, until the 1980s, there was little information around just exactly how prevalent child sexual abuse was. Dr. David Finkelhor wanted to—and would—change all that.

A graduate of Exeter, Harvard, and UNH, by the mid-1980s, Finkelhor was already on his way to becoming one of the most well-known and

respected experts in child sexual abuse research. In 1979, he conducted one of the first surveys of child sexual abuse, interviewing New England college students about its prevalence and discovering that 1 percent of women and 9 percent of men reported experiencing CSA. He soon joined the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire and continued his research into the subject.

In 1985, the year that Sam was born, Finkelhor and fellow researcher Angela Browne proposed a new organizing framework for understanding the impact of childhood sexual abuse. At the time, victims of sexual abuse who suffered symptoms like flashbacks, insomnia, and depression were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder; Drs. Finkelhor and Browne wanted to drill down into the specifics of child sexual abuse, arguing that its differences from traumatic events like war and violent rape meant it deserved a separate, more precise symptom model.

“The literature on child sexual abuse is full of clinical observations about problems that are thought to be associated with a history of abuse, such as sexual dysfunction, depression, and low self-esteem,” they wrote. “However, such observations have not yet been organized into a clear model that specifies how and why sexual abuse results in this kind of trauma.” Their model proposed four “traumagenic dynamics,” which would forever shift the way the psychology community thought about the repercussions of sexual assault. The dynamics—traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization—gave doctors a vocabulary for symptoms that had previously been grouped simply under PTSD and helped them better understand the specific challenges child sexual abuse survivors faced. It was the beginning of a boom in psychological research on the impact of what would later be termed ACEs—or Adverse Childhood Experiences—and how those experiences, like sexual assault, neglect, and abuse, affected people later in life.

The ways in which the Sally sisters would react to the world as adults would, in part, be shaped by the ways in which they reacted to the abuse they’d experienced as kids. Depression, lack of trust, feelings of guilt and shame, revictimization: They would manifest in the sisters’ lives in very different ways, leading them down two diverging paths. While Lori would eventually choose to acknowledge and confront what had happened to her, Sam chose a different coping mechanism: pretending it hadn’t happened at all.

Trauma, especially trauma experienced as a child, when the brain is still developing, can deeply affect memory and even rewire the way our brains react to stress. If an experience is particularly traumatic or overwhelming, the brain can purposefully wall off that memory, keeping it from being accessed to prevent the victim from being retraumatized. Multiple studies have analyzed the way trauma interacts with memory, and found victims often have memory deficits when it comes to list-learning tasks and narrative recall. Other studies, including one published in 2010 in the peer-reviewed journal *BMC Neurology*, pushed this theory a bit further, finding that "physical neglect and emotional abuse might be associated with memory deficits in adulthood, which in turn might pose a risk factor for the development of psychopathology."

Some kids cope with trauma by becoming stuck in an obsessive loop, constantly replaying what happened to them in their heads, unable to move on or think about anything else. Another common path for survivors is denial and dissociation. Research collected by the American Counseling Association has shown that some survivors disassociate to protect themselves from recurrent abuse, which, once the abuse is over, can lead to "feelings of confusion, feelings of disorientation, nightmares, flashbacks, and difficulty experiencing feelings." Others deny that it happened altogether, or convince themselves that if something did happen, it wasn't all that bad and they should just get over it. These two survival mechanisms, dissociating and denying, can continue into adulthood, creating an unhealthy pattern that survivors may fall into when encountering difficult life experiences—experiences like those Sam and Lori would soon confront.

A few months after the sisters moved to Springdale to live with Chris, Sam and Lori met Juan Servantes at a training program for a multilevel marketing company called HYLA. Juan was broad-shouldered with a narrow waist, thick eyebrows, and light brown skin. He had just gotten out of the navy, where he'd served two tours in the Persian Gulf as a navigator. He and his brother, Tony, rented small apartments next to each other in nearby Fayetteville while Juan did HYLA training for extra cash and worked occasional paint projects for a local contractor. The girls introduced themselves and exchanged contact information, promising to invite Juan to the raucous Halloween party Sam and Chris were planning.

Lori was curious about Juan, but also wary. He was twenty-two—four years older than Lori, three older than Sam—and hailed from a large Spanish-American family in Florida. He was stocky and strong—he loved elk hunting and fishing—but, like Sam, he had an underlying sensitivity. Though Juan doesn't have much of a public internet presence, the Twitter account he started years after meeting the Sally sisters is littered with messages that efface that same dichotomous personality: Vulnerable tweets about how much he misses an ex, perhaps one of the sisters, are spliced between ones about how much he loves *Fight Club*, steam punk, and drinking beer.

Lori felt safe with Juan. He was tough and exuded an aura of protectiveness, but he was also sweet in a way that calmed her. A few weeks after meeting, Sam, Chris, Lori, and Juan decided to head to a HYLA convention together in Joplin, Missouri, still hoping they might be able to join the program and make some money in addition to their day jobs. Sam and Chris drove in Chris's car and Juan went with Lori in her Hyundai Elantra. The group raced the entire way there, shooting at 130 mph up I-49 while Lori and Juan talked and flirted for the whole hour-long journey.

After that, Lori was sure that she was developing feelings for Juan. He offered the stability she craved but was also able to let go and enjoy himself in a way none of the Witness men she'd encountered could. She decided she'd go for it. Unbeknownst to the sisters however, Juan saw Lori as a friend—and was much more interested in Sam.

A few days after the convention, Sam and Lori were in Sam's room getting ready for the Halloween party Sam and Chris were throwing at the duplex. Chris and Sam had invited a bunch of their friends from White Cap and from the racing world, fellow twentysomethings who, like the majority of people their age, were more concerned with drinking and having a good time than finding stable work and starting a family—things many of them, including the sisters, weren't set up economically or logistically to do. Lori, who usually hung by herself or with Sam and her friends, was tagging along. The sisters hadn't been allowed to celebrate Halloween as children, and now that they were adults, Sam in particular took pleasure in celebrating the holidays she'd missed as a kid. Though her interests skewed traditionally masculine, she never missed an opportunity to get dressed up; when she was a teenager, Sam would borrow her popular friends' clothes, the clingy halter tops and miniskirts her parents would never let her wear.

She'd leave the house in her regular jeans and T-shirt, a backpack full of her best friend's outfits slung over her shoulder to change into as soon as she was out of sight.

As Sam leaned in closer to the mirror to apply another coat of mascara, Lori started to talk. "Juan is really cute," she swooned. For the last few days, her sister hadn't shut up about her budding crush on Juan, and it was starting to grate on Sam. "I think I really like him," Lori admitted. "I think I'm going to make a move on him tonight."

Sam leaned away from the mirror to look over at her sister. She knew she had to tell Lori what she'd been thinking, but she also felt sheepish and worried Lori would judge her. Recently she'd been secretly considering breaking up with Chris, but everything was so complicated. He was a good guy, generous, and a pleasant companion; he wasn't motivated by money the way Sam was, didn't have that constant need for more, and was content to make whatever he needed to pay the bills and enjoy his youth. They spent weekends road-tripping and camping, and every Saturday night they went to the local track races. Chris thought she seemed happy, but Sam already felt ready to move on. Perhaps she thought their life together had become conventional, and as a young woman who had just broken free of lifelong strictures—from a conservative, religious childhood to an abusive first husband—she didn't want to be trapped in new ones.

As they were getting ready for the Halloween party that night, Sam put the mascara down and looked hard at Lori. "Don't ask Juan out," she said. "Please. Don't ask him out. I really like him."

Lori laughed, incredulous. "*You* like him?" she asked. "You have a boyfriend!"

"Oh, I know. But I really like Juan," Sam admitted. "I'm going to break up with Chris soon, it's just not the right time now. Please?"

Lori eventually agreed, as Sam knew she would. Lori had learned early on that when her sister wanted something, nothing could keep her from having it, and any attempts to intervene would only make things worse. When it came to boys, the two sisters had always been competitive with each other—once, in middle school, Sam had gone out of her way to charm a boy named Ruben that Lori liked, just because she could—but usually Lori would give in and let Sam have what she wanted, because she didn't want a man to get in between them. The pattern was usually the same: Lori would identify a guy she liked, and then Sam would use her beauty and wit

to charm him, eventually telling Lori that actually *she* wanted that guy. Lori would retreat, feeling like she couldn't compete with her older sister's charisma and sex appeal. Ultimately, Sam always got what she wanted, because Lori always let her have it.

Sam spent most of the Halloween party flirting with Juan, while Lori sulked nearby. But a few days afterward, Juan invited Lori over to his apartment to hang out. When she arrived, a guy Lori's age was perched shirtless on the kitchen countertop, his dark brown hair slicked back. Juan's younger brother, Tony, was 5'10" and muscular and covered in tattoos, mostly of skulls, though he also had a large cross inked on the inside of his right forearm. Before the brothers settled in Arkansas, Tony—who was much more of a "bad boy" than Juan—had been arrested in Florida for grand theft in the third degree, though the case had been dismissed due to lack of evidence. He loved horror movies, bowhunting, and drinking, and like Juan he was looking to make money doing odd contractor jobs so he could maintain his lifestyle. In the apartment that night, Tony's legs dangled off the counter with a casualness that made Lori shiver. He was sexy, she thought. And if she couldn't have Juan—a promise she'd already made to her sister—then maybe Tony would do.

Lori and Tony hit it off, and soon they started dating. Lori liked that Tony was always either looking for a fight or a friend: If he couldn't fight someone, he'd befriend them. Sam was relieved by this new development—this meant she could have Juan all to herself. One afternoon, after Chris got home from his shift at White Cap, Sam broke the news: She was moving out and leaving him for Juan.

Chris was shocked. Though Sam had a habit of breaking up with him to flirt with or pursue other men, until Juan, she'd always come back. He knew this time was different—she was actually moving out of the house and leaving him behind. Chris assumed Sam thought Juan could offer her more—money, cars, weed—and traded up. He'd always thought Sam was clever but not smart, cunning but also surprisingly gullible. When they'd first met, she'd told him that when she was younger a psychic had told her she would never have kids, so she'd decided not to because of that. Chris thought that was a strange way to make family planning decisions but chalked it up to Sam's gullibility; she seemed to trust people blindly and believe they had her best interest at heart, even when they showed her time

and time again that they did not. She trusted Juan just as easily, even though they'd only known each other a few weeks.

Sam's abrupt decision to break up with Chris for Juan left Lori with nowhere to go, except the cabin her parents had moved to in Colcord, Oklahoma, where they had begrudgingly agreed to let her stay in spite of her disfellowshipping. The cabin was remote enough that Lori could sneak in and out of the house without other Witnesses knowing she lived there. But Lori didn't want to go back permanently. Juan and Tony had apartments in a small two-story sandstone brick complex on Nettleship Street, near the University of Arkansas. They were tiny—each a one bedroom with a minuscule living room and kitchen—but in a nice area, a stone's throw from the University of Arkansas Stadium and close to lots of restaurants and bars. Not wanting to return home for an extended period of time, Lori and Sam decided to move in with Tony and Juan after only a few weeks of dating. The brothers, infatuated with the sisters, were happy to oblige.

It was the third live-in relationship Sam had had in four years. Ping-ponging between relationships and living situations wasn't unheard of within her social milieu: undereducated, underemployed Ozarks kids struggling to make a living while also living it up. To them, and so many other impoverished Americans, frequent moving was the norm, whether due to inadequate housing, eviction, or neighborhood violence.

Juan introduced the sisters to some of the friends he'd made during his short time in the area, who, like Sam, enjoyed smoking weed and drag racing. Lori believed many of the men were loosely affiliated with a local gang, which wouldn't have been surprising given Arkansas's history of gang violence. Since the '90s, cities like Little Rock had struggled with increasing violent crime, attributed largely to an explosion in gang activity all over the state. Though rates of gang affiliation had begun to decrease in the state in the early aughts, many young people with few resources or family support were still drawn into gangs.

Not long after they met, two of Juan's new friends—a tall Black man named Hector, who Lori purports was the gang leader, and his friend Joseph—asked Sam if she wanted to be initiated into the gang. She didn't hesitate: She said yes right away. Even if they were dangerous, Sam didn't think they posed any danger to *her.* That night, Sam and Juan sat in Juan's tiny living room with Hector and Joseph, a short, wiry man who'd recently moved to Arkansas, and one of the many girls the two of them always had around. It

was sparsely decorated, with just a couch and a TV, and tons of empty beer cans scattered on the kitchen counter. In order to officially be initiated into the gang, Hector said, they would have to prove their loyalty through an act of violence. Juan would have to beat up Sam in front of the group, and Sam would have to accept being beaten.

Sam's heart fluttered, and something like panic arose in her throat. She wasn't sure if they were serious. Juan didn't want to hit Sam, he told them; he couldn't. But before Juan could protest too much, Joseph began to punch Sam, hard, in the face—instead, watching her be hit would be Juan's initiation. Each time Sam began to recover from one ringing blow he would land another. Her head was throbbing and she was so dizzy she could barely stand. Suddenly Hector was dragging her into the bedroom, and Juan was screaming while Joseph restrained him. She was bleeding from her face, and she didn't have the strength to fight him off. He was big and she was small, he was strong and she was weak. In the bedroom, Hector raped Sam, while a girl whose name she didn't know stood over them, laughing and encouraging him.

From her apartment next door, Lori could hear it all: the banging and crashing, her sister's yelling. But Tony didn't want her to see what was going on, insisting he wanted to protect her. Tony, who like Lori was the shyer sibling, had warned Juan against hanging out with these guys. Lori sat terrified in the dark of their apartment, listening to her sister suffer.

Even when they were kids, Lori had always tried her best to shield Sam—from the boys in Lowell who she'd sneak home, from their parents when Sam did something sure to draw punishment. But Sam never wanted her protection, even when she was in real danger. In the summer of 2002, not long after they'd gotten married, Robert and Sam temporarily relocated to a trailer on the Sally family property to give themselves a break from living with Robert's parents in Indiana. Sam hadn't yet officially been excommunicated from the Witness faith, but she also wasn't practicing. One night, Lori was eating dinner on the picnic bench near the trailer when she heard her sister start screaming. She sprinted to the trailer, and found Robert straddling Sam, pinning her down on the ground, his hands around her throat. Lori grabbed Robert from behind, yanking him away from her sister. He was shocked; he wasn't very big, but he also wasn't used to people fighting back, especially women. Lori took a step back into the

trailer doorway, and Robert followed her until they were standing nose to nose. He was panting, hard.

"If you're going to hit someone, you better hit me," Lori said, in that faux commanding tone she used when she was trying to stand up for Sam. She braced herself for Robert's blows, but he just stood there, staring. He refused to touch her. Sam, still visibly shaken, inserted herself between her husband and her sister.

"Get out of here, Lori," she'd spat, as if it was Lori who'd started the whole thing.

Back at Juan's apartment, Hector and Joseph told Sam and Juan they were going to come back with a gun and kill them both for failing the initiation. Sam lay on the bed where they had left her, drifting in and out of consciousness. Juan zigzagged around the apartment, screaming that they had to leave. It made no sense; they had all just been hanging out, drinking beers, and now this?

Juan was insistent that they had to leave Arkansas, that if they were there when Hector and Joseph came back they'd surely be dead. Still dazed from the beating and the rape, Sam began throwing whatever clothes she could find into an overnight bag. Soon Tony was standing in the doorway, closely followed by Lori. When Lori saw Sam's face, the blood crusted around her nose and the sallowness of her skin, she shrieked. "What happened?" she asked, crying and running to Sam's side. But Sam had no time for her dramatics, or to comfort her sister about what she had been through. "They beat me, and they're coming back to kill us," Sam said. "We have to leave. And you and Tony should leave, too."

Lori could barely comprehend what Sam was saying.

"We're leaving right now, and if they come and find that we're not here, they *will* kill you," Sam told her sister. "You need to leave with us."

"But why are they coming after you? What's going on?" Lori cried, as Sam flew around the room, throwing her makeup and shoes into a bag. "We can't just *leave,"* Lori continued. "We have nowhere to go! And Tony and I aren't part of this anyway."

Sam took a deep breath and looked up from her luggage. Lori didn't get it. "It's your life," she said. "We can't force you to do anything. We're just telling you that you need to leave."

When Sam and Juan were finished loading up the car with everything they could possibly fit, they told Lori they were leaving for Florida. They

would stay with Juan and Tony's parents for a little bit, at least until things calmed down in Fayetteville. They were genuinely scared of the gang, and running was better than calling the cops, Juan decided. Who knew what Hector and Joseph would do to them if the police got involved?

It only took a few hours for Lori and Tony to decide they were leaving, too. The two couples—Sam and Juan, Lori and Tony—had only been together for a few months, but they were all aimless and unmoored: young enough that everything in their lives felt temporary, their housing and their jobs and their friendships transitory and makeshift enough that picking up and leaving last-minute wasn't a big deal. As long as they had enough money to make it to Florida, they'd be okay.

Tony and Lori loaded up Lori's Elantra with everything they owned and took off. The sisters were starting over, again, in a new place. They had lived in large cities like Fayetteville and in tiny towns like Lowell, but never away from the Ozarks, which felt familiar and comfortable to them. Growing up on the farm, they'd been backcountry girls, raised on sandstone bluffs and alongside freshwater springs to be good Witnesses, and now they were zooming off to Florida with two brothers they barely knew. It was terrifying—especially with a dangerous gang on their heels—but also, in the moments where they could forget their fears, almost exciting. Possibilities stretched out before them like the asphalt of I-40 east, and at least, for now, they would be together.

Chapter Two

Thousands of miles away, in the rubble of an Iraq ravaged by America's so-called War on Terror, the Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was using the chaotic aftermath of the US invasion to wage a new battle. After founding the militant jihadist group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Group of Monotheism and Jihad) in his home country of Jordan in 1999, the enigmatic extremist spent the better part of the next decade flitting between prisons in Jordan, militant training camps in Afghanistan, and safe houses in Iran and Pakistan, collecting disciples of his extremist ideology. Al-Zarqawi and his devout followers were extreme even by extremist standards; as Salafists—a conservative movement within Sunni Islam—they called for a strict, literal interpretation of the Quran and a return to Islam as it was practiced in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as a fundamental commitment to fighting the enemies of Islam through whatever means necessary. Al-Zarqawi and his followers were anti-America and anti-Israel, but they also believed in *takfirism*, or the righteous killing of Shias, followers of another sect of Islam whom they considered apostates. Their belief in targeting and killing other Muslims was said to have been too severe even for al-Qaeda founder and 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden, with whom al-Zarqawi had a rocky relationship.

Al-Zarqawi relocated to Iraq in 2003, around the time of the botched US invasion, and since then had become the face of the Iraqi insurgency, a bloody two-pronged battle against the Shias of Iraq and the US troops attempting to reestablish order on the ground. As one *Washington Post* profile put it: "Zarqawi was often described as a one-legged Palestinian whose uncanny ability to avoid capture led some people to doubt that he really existed. But according to Jordanian and European intelligence officials, he did exist and he had two legs." In 2003 and 2004, Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad orchestrated numerous deadly attacks across the country, including attacks on the UN and Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad, the Kurdish party offices, and the Imam Ali Mosque, the holiest Shia shrine in Iraq. They also kidnapped and assassinated foreign citizens, including the US diplomat Laurence Foley.

Al-Zarqawi was notorious for his bloodthirsty approach and his internet savvy. Even in 2004, before social media and smartphones took hold of the

global consciousness, al-Zarqawi recognized the power of the internet to spread his violent messages. “Prior to the initiation of his internet-based public-relations campaign, each of al-Zarqawi’s attacks had to kill large numbers of people in order to get noticed amid the chaos and mounting daily death toll in Iraq,” researcher Maura Conway wrote in her paper “From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The Emergence and Development of an Online Radical Milieu.” “By going online however, al-Zarqawi was able to both control the interpretation of his violent message and achieve greater impact with smaller operations.”

One of these “smaller operations” was among his most notorious: in May 2004, al-Zarqawi posted footage of himself beheading American hostage Nicholas Berg on the internet, starting the trend of bloody viral content that would continue through the 2010s and become a hallmark of the Islamic State.

In June 2004, not long before the Sally sisters met the Servantes brothers in Arkansas, al-Zarqawi decided that the group’s best chance at gaining true power in Iraq was to join with another influential terrorist group: al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden himself. Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq. “This is undoubtedly an indication that victory is approaching, God willing, and that it represents a return to the glorious past,” al-Zarqawi said in his online statement. “We shall, with great fury, instill fear in the enemies of Islam, who consider that through their war in Iraq they have nearly uprooted Islam from its recent stronghold. For this, we will turn [the war] into a hell for them.”

With the help of al-Qaeda, al-Zarqawi and his followers controlled financial resources, weapons, and foreign fighters flowing into and out of Iraq, and continued their onslaught of brutal bombings and kidnappings of Shia and Western enemies. By May 2005, al-Zarqawi was the most wanted man in both Jordan and Iraq, with the US offering a $25 million reward to anyone who could help them track him down. Six months later, he was added to the FBI’s most wanted list.

In early 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq and several other Iraqi insurgency groups consolidated under the umbrella network Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin, with al-Zarqawi as one of the leaders. The groups worked both together and separately to, as they put it, “ward off the invading *kafir* (infidels) and their apostate stooges” through terrorist attacks across Iraq. But just six months after the council was formed, in June 2006, al-Zarqawi

was killed in an American air strike. The terrorist with an “uncanny ability to avoid capture” had finally been caught. But his vision—that Iraq should be cleansed of non-Sunni Muslims and foreign invaders and become a Caliphate ruled by Islamic religious law—lived on. It was al-Zarqawi’s Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin that would soon become the Islamic State.

Back in the US, as the fifth anniversary of 9/11 approached, President George W. Bush continued his attempts to garner support for the “War on Terror” through rhetoric villainizing Islam and the Middle East. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were an ideological struggle between “tyranny and freedom,” he told the nation in a speech delivered on September 11, 2006, and it was the US’s duty to commit “America’s influence in the world to advancing freedom and democracy as the great alternatives to repression and radicalism.”

As Bush unwittingly set the stage for a resurgence in extremism, Sam and Lori were focused on the prosaic details of their day-to-day lives—lives circumscribed by violence and poverty, and which they could not have imagined would come to intersect with these large geopolitical forces. Neither sister closely followed foreign policy, and their chaotic circumstances dictated that they spend their energy managing personal crisis after personal crisis, not reflecting deeply on national politics.

In late 2006, Sam and Juan settled into the three-bedroom Servantes house in Mulberry, a phosphate mining city east of Tampa. Lori and Tony moved into a one-bedroom trailer in nearby Lakeland and Lori got a job at a TexMex restaurant while Tony searched for work. Their trailer didn’t have hot water or gas, so they couldn’t cook; most nights Lori brought food home from work or they’d soak ramen noodles in lukewarm water.

Florida was the beginning of a pattern of insecure housing and low-paying jobs that continued through Lori’s twenties. Sam also struggled to find well-paying work. Richard and Lisa had pulled their daughters out of school to work full-time when Sam was fourteen and Lori was thirteen, so the sisters had very little formal education. (Lori eventually got her GED through correspondence classes when she was sixteen.) This is extremely common in the Jehovah’s Witness faith, where a healthy majority—63 percent of Witness adults—have only a high school degree or less. Education in general, but especially higher education, is actively discouraged by the Watchtower Association. Elders believe that it is

“spiritually dangerous,” as higher education “can erode thinking and convictions.” Witnesses also believe that pursuing an education detracts from time best used to convert neighbors and prepare for Armageddon. Lori and Sam’s mother made it clear from an early age that she only allowed them to go to school so that she wouldn’t get in trouble with the state for truancy and pulled them out as soon as it was legal.

In Florida, away from their family, Sam seemed to feel free and unburdened, but Lori, who was much more introspective and concerned with questions of morality, was still struggling with sexual trauma and guilt over leaving her religion. Ever since she lost her virginity to rape when she was fifteen, she’d felt like she was rotten inside, as though despite the best efforts of her parents and of God, she was turning out evil. She knew that being raped by one of her coworkers wasn’t her fault, that she hadn’t lost her virginity on purpose, but she was still consumed by guilt and sometimes thought that she could’ve stopped it if she’d tried hard enough. She’d grown up seeing the girls and women around her victimized by the men in their lives—her female relative sexually abused by their father, and her older sister nearly beaten to death by a man who claimed to love her. Lori was only fifteen when she was raped, but she was already a fierce protector of the people she loved. So how was it that she couldn’t protect herself? For her, that was the part that hurt the most. Was this how Sam felt when Robert touched her, when he wrapped his rough hands around the ligaments of her neck? That moment when a man’s lust turns suddenly into violence: Lori had spent her whole young life fighting against becoming one of those girls—her family members, her friends, her sister—another victim. And then, on an ordinary workday, despite all her best efforts, she’d become one.

George worked at the restaurant where she waitressed. He had a round face and small, thick hands, and the way he looked at her felt strange but also gratifying; there was a hunger in his eyes that, at fifteen, Lori had started to notice on the faces of the men around her, when they came into the restaurant for midnight burritos after a night of drinking or when she tied her apron extra tight around her waist. If she was super friendly and quick with their appetizers, sometimes they would leave a big tip, along with their phone numbers scrawled lazily on the back of the check.

One day George asked for a ride to work, and because he lived on the way to the restaurant, Lori obliged. She wasn’t supposed to have strange men in her car, but she liked being helpful and figured this one time

wouldn’t hurt. On the way to the restaurant that day, after she’d already picked George up, Lori realized she’d forgotten her apron at home and had to turn around to go get it. When they arrived she parked outside the empty farmhouse and told George to wait in the car.

It happened really quickly after that. There was a blur of limbs, the feeling of her wrists being pinned down to the couch. George had not waited in the car. There was blood, a lot of it, because Lori was a virgin and George had put himself inside her, even as she struggled to unpin herself. Lori was tough. This was the girl who threatened to kill her sister’s abusive boyfriends and took punishments from her father’s belt like it was nothing. When she finally managed to push him off she ran to the bathroom, locked herself inside, and started to sob.

George trotted after her. Through the door he apologized over and over and swore he wouldn’t do it again. Lori didn’t have her cell phone with her, and there was no landline in the bathroom, so there wasn’t much she could do. After she cleaned up the blood she cautiously pulled open the door, and there was George, staring expectantly. When she tried to bolt for the car he grabbed her. He pushed her down again, right there on the floor of her grandparents’ farmhouse, and sodomized her. After he was finished, he told her to get cleaned up; they were going to be late for work.

The night after the rape, sitting in her room alone, Lori couldn’t even bring herself to cry. She wanted to, even just to remind herself that she was still alive, but it was as if the part of herself that felt things had shut down the moment he had touched her. Lori knew she was shocked, ashamed, angry, but she felt only a sense of complacency, a total resignation to the cold facts of the day. She had been raped. She was no longer a virgin. She was likely not going to survive Armageddon now. And she absolutely could not tell anyone. Lori had woken up that day one thing and she had ended it as something else, something hardened, something unfixable. She hadn’t wanted to have sex, but the reality was that she had, and it had marked her. Lori thought that if she went to the Witness elders to beg for forgiveness, they would blame her. What was she doing driving this strange man around in her car in the first place? What did she think would happen? She needed somebody—anybody—to tell her that what had happened wasn’t her fault, to utter words of comfort. But Sam was distracted with Robert and Richard was on the road and Lisa was spending all her time trying to save the souls

of other people, people who weren't her daughter. Lori was completely alone.

The rape sent Lori, who at fifteen was still a true believer in the Witness doctrine, into a spiral of shame and confusion. In her late teens, Lori struggled with her religious identity, desperate to meet Witness standards of piety and womanhood but somehow always falling short. The longer she spent away from her family in places like Springdale and Florida, the more she began to question the way she'd been raised, but it was also the only way she knew how to live. She'd been told her whole life that humanity was evil, that the world was ending, that all pleasure was nefarious; it would take much more work—work she wouldn't do until years later—to truly reckon with that. In Florida with Tony, Lori was stuck somewhere between the good Witness girl she'd been and the person she'd become: half believing she had fallen short in her religious path and the world would end, and half believing that there was another way to live.

From the moment they'd landed in Florida, it wasn't what Lori envisioned life outside of the Ozarks would look like. On the seventeen-hour, nearly twelve-hundred-mile drive from Fayetteville, she'd pictured long stretches of sandy beaches, palm trees rustling against a dip-dyed sunset, plucking oranges for breakfast straight off the tree. Instead she found herself in Lakeland, a good forty-five minutes from any beach, in a county that—when she arrived in 2006—was in the midst of a skyrocketing opioid epidemic. To Lori, Polk County, where the two couples landed, seemed to be dotted with pill mills advertising easy prescriptions for oxycodone and hydrocodone. In Florida as a whole, overdose deaths increased by 208 percent between 2000 and 2018, and in Polk County in 2006, drug use and imprisonment rates were both much higher than the national average, complicated by the abject poverty Lori and many of her neighbors lived in.

Lori felt especially directionless during her year in Lakeland: living with a guy she liked but didn't see a future with, working eighteen-hour shifts at interchangeable dead-end jobs, with no higher education, no money, and no support system. She and Tony didn't have a car, so she barely saw her sister, who was about thirty minutes away with Juan and his parents back at their family home. Sam took on temping jobs here and there, but spent most of her time partying or hanging out with Juan's younger sisters.

In the spring of 2007, Sam found out she was pregnant. Despite what the psychic had told her years earlier, she was excited—the idea of being *needed* the way a baby needed its mother appealed to her—but also dreaded losing her independence. Lori was horrified that Sam had chosen to continue the pregnancy, considering her lifestyle. Sam partied a lot—weed, cocaine, and pills—made very little money, and lived in a cramped house with her boyfriend's family. She'd also recently gone to stay with her parents for a few weeks, wanting a break from Juan, and she spent most nights she wasn't working out at bars with her friend Crystal, a forty-something woman who Lori thought was a redneck drunk. It was not exactly the perfect situation in which to raise a baby. And yet, as Sam's only relative within a thousand-mile radius, Lori felt obligated to support her. Lori went with Sam to her doctor's appointments and helped her shop for everything she'd need for the baby. Juan, who hadn't really worked since he'd left the navy, got a job at a nearby plumbing company.

Juan's family and friends were excited about Sam's pregnancy. His mother, Diane, was eager to meet her first grandchild, and Sam's new friend Crystal was insistent that she be present in the delivery room. Sam had told Lori she wanted her to be there, too, but when Lori showed up at the hospital on the day Sam went into labor, they informed her she hadn't been put on the visitors' list—only Diane and Crystal had. Lori thought Sam thrived on the drama and had done it on purpose to entertain herself. She was upset that she wouldn't get to witness the birth of her nephew, but not surprised; Sam had been backtracking on her promises for as long as she could remember. Lori was used to being disappointed by her sister, who was far more loyal to strangers than she was to her own family. The dynamic was frustrating for both of them: Lori felt like she was constantly seeking Sam's approval, which Sam dangled in front of her and then rescinded at the last minute because Lori said or did something that annoyed her. Sam felt like Lori was the ultimate wet blanket, a constant source of negativity who existed exclusively to scold her.

When Sam's son, Michael, was born on October 5, 2007, he looked like a turtle, all bald and slow-moving and with dark, soulful eyes. Sam loved him immediately: the way he snuggled into her, the way he cried when anyone other than her held him. Here, she thought, was a person who would love her unconditionally, a person who couldn't leave. But even motherhood couldn't separate Sam from her social life. With a low-paying

job as a bartender and little formal education, Sam's primary motivation in life was to have fun and enjoy herself. She'd often leave the baby with Lori or with Juan's sixteen-year-old sister, Stephanie, so that she could go out with Crystal.

While Sam, Juan, and Michael stayed in the house with Juan's parents, Lori and Tony bounced from one untenable housing situation to the next. Tony was having trouble finding a job, so Lori was again saddled with all the bills. Though her feelings about him had begun to wane, his conservative Catholic parents had been bugging them to get married, and because her relationship with Tony was the closest thing to a stable family unit that she had, Lori finally agreed. There was nothing romantic or sentimental about it: A notary came to Tony's parents' trailer, they signed some papers, and that was it. Sam, still wary of marriage after the terror of Robert, continued to refuse Juan's proposals. They had the baby, she reasoned. What else did he need?

After the Sally sisters' two years in Florida, the Ozarks were pulling them gently back. They missed the swimming holes and the springs, the stains that wild berries left on their clothes after afternoons foraging, even the tangy scent of fermented chicken feed. They missed cold winters and county fairs. They missed home, but they also hated the instability they'd found in Florida, and especially now that Sam had a baby, they wanted support from the few friends and family they had in Arkansas. It was time to return.

Though their daughters had been disfellowshipped and they were disappointed with their choices, the Sally parents still loved them and harbored some hope that now that the girls were home in the Ozarks, they might be able to get onto a better path—and back into the Witness faith. When Sam, Juan, Lori, and Tony arrived in Arkansas, Lisa helped Lori and Tony find a small one-bedroom apartment on the south side of Fayetteville, just twenty minutes from the little farm where Sam and Lori had grown up. The Cleveland Place apartment complex abutted Scull Creek and was popular with University of Arkansas students looking for an alternative to dorm life. Lori got rehired to waitress at the Denny's she'd worked at as a teenager, and the two quickly settled into the rhythm of life in Fayetteville. Though they were technically married, her relationship with Tony felt more like a friendship—they made each other laugh constantly, and liked

spending time together, but the romance just wasn't there. Still, they occasionally slept together, and enjoyed taking rambling walks across the Arkansas plateaus, talking and listening to the evening hum of cicadas.

Not long after they arrived in Fayetteville, in the summer of 2007, she and Tony were on one of those long walks when Lori was hit with the sudden smell of Chinese food. It was bizarre—they were nowhere near any restaurants, let alone a Chinese restaurant. Suddenly she was bowled over on the side of the road, violently throwing up while Tony gingerly patted her back. She knew right away: She was pregnant.

Lori had been through this before. Five years earlier, in 2002, when she was sixteen and Sam was off living with Robert, Lori met a twenty-eight-year-old man named Frank, who had previously been in jail for a slew of crimes, including assault, harassment, and theft. Lori was living in her parents' new house in Colcord, Oklahoma, and though she wasn't supposed to date, she was wild with loneliness. Frank was nearly twice her age, with brown skin and a broad chest. He had been born into a large family on a Native American reservation, but after his mother died when he was young, he and his siblings were split up and adopted out to separate homes. It was Lori's first real relationship, if you can call a relationship between a sixteen-year-old girl and a twenty-eight-year-old man a real relationship. Frank was jealous and controlling, and throughout the course of their several-month relationship got her fired from two jobs because he was always calling her or showing up while she was on duty. Not long after Lori started dating Frank, a few months after she turned seventeen, he got her pregnant. Lori was totally isolated—the only contact she had with the outside world was her job waitressing at Denny's. Otherwise she had no friends, didn't go to school, and barely saw her parents, who were always working, or Sam, who was living with Robert. Lori was still reeling from losing her virginity through rape, and felt constantly like she would never live up to the standards her parents and the church had set. The pregnancy seemed like another failure in a continually expanding list.

Lori didn't tell anyone that she was pregnant, and Richard and Lisa didn't notice until she started to show. Ever since they'd sold the family farm and moved to Oklahoma, Lori had been closed off and despondent, due largely to the trauma of the rape her parents didn't know about. But suddenly she was throwing up in the early mornings, and her stomach had begun to swell. One day when Richard was home from his trucking route

and they were out running errands together, he asked her what was wrong. Lori came out and said it, because at that point she was six months pregnant and there was nothing else she could do. Her parents were furious and humiliated; they'd already lost one daughter to wickedness when Sam went to live with Robert, and now they'd lost another one, too.

Sex before marriage is not allowed within Witness congregations, as Witnesses believe the marriage bed must be "without defilement" (Hebrews 13:4). Though teen pregnancy is impossible to quantify within such a secretive religion, its incidence clearly bothered the Elders who wrote the Witness literature, as dozens of articles published over the years in the Witness magazine *Awake!* discuss what they call the "global tragedy" of teen pregnancy. Though immoral women had to be disfellowshipped, a 1994 issue of *Awake!* advises on the best ways to handle unwed mothers under eighteen. "Although having a child out of wedlock is difficult, it is not the end of one's life," reads the article. "God 'forgives in a large way' those who repent of their wrongs (Isaiah 55:7). Meditating on this can help a single mother overcome feelings of self-loathing that may come over her at times. When feeling discouraged, she can lean upon Jehovah and approach him in prayer. She can also implore God's help in rearing her child."

The article also notes that "Some in the congregation may be moved to find discreet ways to render some practical assistance to a single parent. (Compare Deuteronomy 24:17–20; James 1:27.) At the very least, they can provide friendship and a hearing ear when it is needed (Proverbs 17:17). Although the parents committed a serious sin, the child is blameless. So the congregation can help if the mother shows a right attitude."

Richard and Lisa knew their Congregation would eventually find out about Lori, but they didn't want to face the shame right away. They decided to send Lori to live with Lisa's mother, Meemaw, four hours away in Hot Springs, where she could grow Frank's child inside of her in secret. Lori was four weeks overdue by the time Lisa came back to Hot Springs and took her to be induced at the hospital in Little Rock. The University of Arkansas Medical Center was a teaching hospital, and in the throes of her contractions Lori agreed to let a group of young students observe the birth. An intern stepped up to give her the epidural, and only the right half of her body went numb; an impatient nurse stood on her left side, squeezing Lori's knee and encouraging her to push. When the birth was over, she had a baby

girl. Lori had thought long and hard about what she would name the baby. Names hold a lot of power, she thought; they can tell a whole story about a person before they even speak. She settled on Wailele, a Hawaiian word that meant “waterfall,” because she liked the way it sounded: musical but strong. But nobody else in her family liked it—Lisa and Richard were worried the child would be mocked in rural Oklahoma with a name like that—so Lori went with her second choice, another name from Hawaii, a far-off place she had never seen. Lanai Kai Sally was born.

That night, Lori lay exhausted in the hospital bed with her mother sleeping in the chair beside her. She thought about her daughter—God, she was sixteen and had a daughter—imagining her peacefully asleep in the nursery down the hall. Lori felt a tightening in her chest that she could not explain, a cauldron of regret and grief and love for her newborn child. Lori desperately needed help—therapy, money, education, friends—but she had been raised in a world where these things were hard to come by; instead, she was meant to derive all her advice and strength from the writings of the Watchtower Society, the eight men in Brooklyn who decided what she could and couldn’t do, what she should and shouldn’t feel. It was through Jehovah’s guidance alone, they said, that she would recover from the suffering she’d experienced. But having a baby out of wedlock had marked her, and now the elders of her community dictated that if she wanted to be accepted back into the Congregation she needed to enter a “reproof” period of undetermined time, during which no member of the Jehovah’s Witness faith would be allowed to speak to her or even acknowledge her presence. When a member of the Congregation enters “reproof,” their sin is announced to the whole Congregation, because according to Witness literature, “If a sin is widely known or will undoubtedly become known, an announcement to the congregation would likely be appropriate in order to protect its reputation.”

“During the time that an individual who has been judicially reproved is healing spiritually, he might be likened to a person recovering from an injury, which temporarily limits his activity,” the literature advises. “For a time, very likely it would be beneficial for the repentant one to listen rather than comment at meetings. The elders may arrange for someone to have a Bible study with him to strengthen him where he is weak so that he may again become ‘healthy in faith’ (Titus 2:2). All of this is done in love and is not intended to punish the wrongdoer.”

Though it apparently wasn't supposed to, Lori's reproof did feel like a punishment. During this period, to prove that she was sufficiently repentant, Lori would still have to attend every meeting, but she could only sit silently in the back of the Kingdom Hall. If she endured her reproof and appeared to genuinely regret her actions and want to accept Jehovah back into her life, she would be welcomed back into the community. But if the Elders determined she hadn't learned her lesson, she'd be permanently disfellowshipped, ostracized from every Jehovah's Witness congregation in the world. Lori tried her best to be pious and survive the reproof—she cut ties with Frank entirely—but she was certain there was something wrong with her. She desperately wanted to be the meek and submissive Witness girl she thought her parents and the Congregation wanted her to be, but she was finding it increasingly difficult. Lori was a sixteen-year-old undereducated single mother living with her parents and making terrible money as a Denny's waitress. Aside from her parents, who kept her at arm's length because of the reproof, and Sam, who was still living with Robert, she had no friends or family to support her. She didn't feel capable—spiritually, financially, emotionally, practically—of taking care of Lanai.

About a year after she gave birth, Lori asked her parents to formally adopt Lanai. They agreed, eager for the opportunity to have a new baby to raise in the Witness faith. "This is the way it's going to be," Lori told them one night, not long after Lanai's first birthday. "You guys are going to be her parents. She's going to grow up in a stable home and that's it. If you guys want to tell her I'm her mother, that's up to you, but I will never tell her. I will never interfere." From then on, Lanai wasn't Lori's daughter; instead, they referred to her as Lori's "sister." Lanai was less than two years old when Lori decided to leave for good and was officially disfellowshipped.

Five years later, back in Arkansas, Lori was more mature, free of the reproachful gaze of her parents, and she felt like she could choose whether to continue the pregnancy. She didn't want to have another child just to dump him or her on her parents, but she knew that the way she and Tony lived—working dead-end jobs, living paycheck to paycheck—wasn't appropriate for a baby. Lori looked into adoption but was terrified by the idea that the baby could end up with an abusive family and she would never know. There was one other option, one that she would have never considered five years ago when she got pregnant with Lanai: abortion. Like

most strict Christian religions, Jehovah's Witnesses are against abortion, but having officially been disfellowshipped, Lori was no longer a Jehovah's Witness. She still believed in God and still struggled to disentangle herself from the religious teachings of her childhood. But away from the judgment of the Witness community, and armed with firsthand knowledge of just how difficult trying to raise a baby was, Lori was able to make peace with the decision to have an abortion.

Tony didn't want to settle down and have kids, so he said he'd be supportive of whatever decision Lori made, even taking her to her appointment. But after the abortion, he struggled to move on. Tony and Juan had been raised Catholic, a Christian denomination that—like Witnesses—believes abortion is a sin. Even though he wasn't exactly living the most godly life, Tony felt immense guilt for agreeing to let Lori get the abortion. The two had been together for more than three years at this point; it wasn't very long, as relationships go, but it was long enough that their relationship was marked by poverty, violence, housing insecurity, crime, and drug use. And that whole time Lori had been doing the daily tasks of living mostly on her own, working as her household's breadwinner and taking care of chores and meals. The more time passed, the more it started to feel like her life with Tony had been a scrimmage, a practice run to see if she really could survive on her own without her parents. It wasn't easy, but the longer Lori was away from them, the more confident she felt that she could do it.

In August 2008, Lori told Tony she wanted to try to start a better life for herself. She was itching to move to another part of the country she'd never been, perhaps somewhere on the West Coast, where she could be close to the Pacific Ocean. Tony, who still didn't have a job, agreed that their friendship-marriage had run its course, and the two decided to get divorced. Until she could figure out what she wanted to do next, Lori went to Morris, Oklahoma, to stay with Sam and Juan, who'd gotten a job working at the local Coca-Cola factory. Morris was tiny—only 1.25 square miles—and Sam's house was in a remote town forty-five minutes south of Tulsa and about two hours from where her parents lived in Colcord. Lori slept on the couch. Sam was staying at home taking care of Michael, and at first it seemed to Lori like her sister was stabilizing and starting to build a good life for her young son. Juan had a solid paycheck and benefits from the factory, and out in the country, they were insulated from the bad influences

that seemed to follow Sam wherever she went. The sisters would wake up each morning to have coffee and watch *The Steve Wilkos Show* while Michael played contentedly on the floor. But a few weeks into her stay, Lori began to notice how deeply depressed her sister actually was: She was sleeping all day, chain-smoking, and letting dirty dishes and laundry pile up around the house. In the mornings Michael would wake up hungry and cry for food, and Sam would just keep sleeping, refusing to get up and feed him. At night she rarely cooked, occasionally warming up some Hamburger Helper and scattering it on his high-chair tray. Sam's life was growing slow and predictable, and Lori watched as that familiar, deadening depression crept in, her sister, with fewer ways to distract herself, seemingly bored, once again, with a life not tinged with danger. Lori found it confusing. Sam had what Lori was looking for but hadn't found with Tony: a stable and financially secure partner, a baby she could provide for, a nice home. For the first time since she'd left her parents, Sam had a family unit. Why couldn't her sister be happy with that?

Lori was only planning to stay for a few months, until she could save up enough money to move, but while she was in Morris she tried to help Sam as best she could. She got a job waitressing at a local Sonic Drive-In and helped babysit Michael on her time off. Lori worked in the evenings, so, most days, after Sam had her coffee and went back to sleep, she'd help take care of Michael and Sam's dog, an overweight rottweiler named Rosy. She'd encourage Juan and Sam to go out on dates, but Lori could tell their relationship was deteriorating. Juan, who'd always been laid-back and outdoorsy, thrived in the country and seemed content with the new life they'd built. But Sam was restless: She'd come back to the Ozarks to get support from her parents—who technically weren't supposed to talk to her since she'd left the faith, but occasionally did anyway—not to construct a parallel version of her monotonous upbringing. She and Juan weren't going to the Kingdom Hall or preaching or denying themselves simple pleasures like television, but their domestic routine was tedious all the same. Lori could see that Sam was starting to crack—that soon she'd give in to her desire to destroy and bring the whole thing down—and no matter how many date nights she encouraged them to go on, it wouldn't matter. Sam was ruinous. Sam would run.

When they first developed their Traumagenic Dynamics Model for understanding the effects of childhood sexual abuse in 1985, Drs. David Finkelhor and Angela Browne marshaled the existing research to argue that almost all the behaviors and disorders common in adults who experienced childhood sexual abuse correlated to one of the four dynamics they identified. Traumatic sexualization, for example, is "associated with confusion about sexual norms and standards." Many children who have been sexually abused may misunderstand the role of sex in romantic relationships when they reach adulthood, particularly if their abuser taught them to see sex as a way to receive affection or special treatment. They may view sex as a tool to meet their needs, rather than a loving act between partners. Sam was unafraid to wield her flirting skills like a deadly weapon to get what she wanted, a silvery throwing star of flattery and coyness that always landed dead between the eyes.

Other common long-term effects of childhood abuse, such as depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders, may stem from the betrayal dynamic, in which children suffer from grief and disillusionment after being victimized by someone they trusted. "There may be an intense need to regain trust and security, manifested in the extreme dependency and clinging seen in especially young victims," wrote Drs. Finkelhor and Browne. "This same need in adults may show up in impaired judgment about the trustworthiness of other people, or in a desperate search for a redeeming relationship… several studies of female incest victims have remarked on the vulnerability of these women to relationships in which they are physically, psychologically, and sexually abused." Powerlessness, the dynamic by which survivors feel a sense of disempowerment after having been physically and emotionally violated, can manifest in nightmares, hypervigilance, and insomnia. And stigmatization can lead to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, guilt, and shame, which may spiral into drug and alcohol addiction or criminal activity—all things Sam had or would experience.

A year after proposing their new model, the doctors released another study. It was 1986, the year Lori was born. The researchers reviewed empirical studies of the symptoms of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and found that "frequently reported long-term effects include depression and self-destructive behavior, anxiety, feelings of isolation and

stigma, poor self-esteem, difficulty in trusting others, a tendency toward revictimization, substance abuse, and sexual maladjustment."

Victims may also develop self-destructive patterns, particularly when it comes to romantic relationships. They may be flighty, emotionally avoidant and unwilling to commit long-term. Particularly when children are abused by a person they'd known and trusted, like Sam and Lori say they were, it can be difficult to trust a romantic partner enough to develop a healthy, sustaining relationship. According to Drs. Finkelhor and Browne, "victims reported difficulty trusting others that included reactions of fear, hostility, and a sense of betrayal. Briere (1984) [a researcher cited by Finkelhor and Browne] noted fear of men in 48 % of his clinical subjects (vs. 15 % of the nonvictims). Incest victims seem especially likely to experience difficulty in close relationships: Sixty-four percent of the victims in Meiselman's (1978) clinical study [also cited by Finkelhor and Browne], compared with 40 % of the control group, complained of conflict with or fear of their husbands or sex partners, and 39% of the sample had never married." Another study, published in 2004 in the psychiatric journal *Child Abuse & Neglect,* found that female victims of childhood sexual abuse "were less likely to have positive perceptions of current romantic partners and to be sexually faithful."

The inattention Sam and Lori had experienced as children—both physical, when their parents left them alone for hours a day while they worked, and emotional, when their parents refused to give them positive feedback about things like doing well in school—also deeply affected Sam, who was constantly trying to make up for her parents' lack of approval by getting validation from others, mostly from men. In fact, there wasn't a single area of Sam's and Lori's lives—professional, romantic, interpersonal, psychological—that wouldn't be touched by their experiences as children.

But how was it possible that two siblings exposed to the same traumatic event could cope with it so differently? Both sisters would face struggles in their adult lives that could be traced back to their childhood abuse, but as they grew older, those traumatic experiences would begin to have a very different effect on them. For Sam, the effects would eventually manifest in ways even experts like Drs. Finkelhor and Browne couldn't predict.

Chapter Three

Growing up as Witnesses, the Sally sisters had been taught that planning for the future was useless, because Armageddon could come at any time and the material world was temporary. But the longer Lori was out of the Witnesses, the more she realized that planning for the future was necessary—and that she should start doing it as soon as possible.

Two months into her stay with Sam and Juan, Lori decided to move out. She wanted to give them the privacy to work on their relationship, and she'd saved enough money to find a small place of her own. She'd already lived in the Midwest and the Southeast, so she wanted to try her luck on the West Coast, where the weather was temperate and she could be close to nature. Lori didn't have any friends there, and had never even visited the Pacific Northwest, but she decided to search Craigslist for apartments in Seattle. She'd always lived with other people, with her parents or Sam or Tony, but she was determined to find a place of her own where she could start fresh and leave everything she'd accumulated in her life behind: the gang initiation, the husband she'd just separated from, her depressed older sister, even her daughter, Lanai, whom she still felt incapable of caring for and, because her parents were raising her as a Witness and Lori had been disfellowshipped, she saw rarely. She sold her car to Sam and bought a one-way ticket to Seattle. It was October 2008. Lori was twenty-two years old.

Lori was thrilled to be off on a new adventure. It was the first time she would be truly striking out on her own, without her parents or her sister. She moved into a small room in a newly constructed home on a mountain road in Port Orchard, Washington. The city was small and lush with imposing evergreen trees, tucked away on the Sinclair Inlet about fifteen miles west of Seattle by ferry. One-lane roads hugged narrow mountain curves, with craggy cliffs that dropped precipitously into the water. The main street was dotted with antiques shops, cafés, and pottery shops, and led down to a large marina where hundreds of boats were docked year-round. Lori loved that it was rugged and outdoorsy but still near a major city. The $1,300 per month studio apartment she'd seen on Craigslist, owned by a man in his thirties named Peter, promised its own private staircase and entrance, a kitchenette and private bathroom. But when she arrived in Port Orchard, she realized she'd been duped: Her "studio"

apartment was little more than a dark, unfurnished room with no kitchenette or bathroom, and though there was a private staircase, she had to walk through the house to access it. Peter told her that she was welcome to use the bathroom and kitchen in the main house, but Lori was uncomfortable with that arrangement: He was a stranger, after all, and he had tricked her into paying him for an apartment with features that didn't exist. But for now she was stuck there, with no family or friends nearby to turn to, and not enough money to quickly move into a new place.

Even though she was trying hard to break old patterns, Lori once again found herself without a safe place to live, and with very little money and no friends or family nearby, it was proving difficult to find one. It was clear on that very first night that Lori needed to move, but first she would need to make some money. During the day when Peter went off to work, she would walk around Port Orchard looking for a job. It was October 2008—the start of the economic crisis in the US—and work was hard to come by. At night, Peter insisted she sit with him in the living room and watch TV. If she excused herself to her room too early in the evening, he would accuse her of being antisocial, and threaten her with eviction. He was jealous and controlling; he acted like an abusive partner, and she wasn't even dating him. So a couple of months later, when she met Jason Elhassani on the dating website Plenty of Fish and he offered her a job at his shipping business, she accepted right away. A week after she started, she moved in with him in nearby Tacoma.

Lori knew, even at twenty-two, that what she was doing was crazy: moving in with a guy she'd been dating for a week? It was something she'd judge Sam for. But Jason seemed sweet and being with him felt safer than staying in that big house alone with Peter.

It helped that Jason Elhassani was handsome. He was intense and serious, with close-cropped black hair and dark eyes. He was a loner and a hard worker who loved playing indoor soccer and video games. He was close with his large family, spread between the US and Morocco, all of whom seemed to be well-off and well educated. Lori loved how worldly and conscientious Jason was; like her, he was driven to succeed in life and make something of himself. Unlike Tony, who always complained that he hated having a job, Jason seemed to enjoy working and making money to support his lifestyle. In the beginning, Jason treated Lori like a prize he had lucked into winning, like she was a bird who might fly off if he wasn't

gentle enough. Lori liked that about him, his placidity, his attunement to her needs. He was doting, industrious, responsible. She saw a chance at a new life taking shape.

Jason had moved from Morocco to the US to study in 2005, when he was seventeen, and hailed from a large upper-middle-class family from Rabat. Now twenty, he went to school part-time while running his own package forwarding company, which sent packages purchased at online American retailers by people who lived outside of the US to the countries in which they lived. Jason operated the business with his older brother Moussa out of an apartment-turned-office in Tacoma. Moussa had studied engineering at Fresno State University but dropped out before graduating. Jason had six older brothers and one younger sister, all of whom were in the US on student or work visas; his parents also lived in the US, but made frequent trips back to Morocco, where they still owned property. The Elhassani family was part of a larger nationwide trend of Moroccans immigrating to the US for educational opportunities; between 1990 and 2000, the number of Moroccan immigrants living in the US increased by 104 percent. The Elhassani family's oldest brother, Salaheddine, was in his late twenties, had studied computer engineering at North Dakota State University and worked in Fargo at a software company; the second eldest, Abdelillah, had graduated from North Dakota State and lived in California, running a business reselling camera equipment he purchased on eBay; the next two brothers—Abdelhadi and Abdelfattah, along with Jason's younger sister Fatima Zahra—were also studying at North Dakota State University. Lori was excited at the chance to be part of a big new family; she and her parents were barely speaking now that she was off on her own.

Jason and Moussa lived with a large black cat named Grrrmow in an upscale two-bedroom condo with a sweeping view of Mount Rainier. The interiors were masculine and bachelor-like, all reds and blacks and leather. The apartment was only on the fourth floor, but nestled as it was in the Olympic Mountains, and with snowcapped Mount Rainier in the distance, it gave Lori the feeling of living in the clouds. At night when she fell asleep next to Jason in his queen-size mahogany sleigh bed, tucked away in the nicest apartment she'd ever lived in, she could feel her former precarity dissolving away. In Jason it felt like she had found a solution to her romantic and economic woes; unlike with Tony, Lori felt like she could depend on him to contribute to their household income, that they could be

equal partners. Maybe with Jason she could really settle down, have a permanent home, even start a family—things that her economic situation had prevented her from doing before.

Lori handled customer service and receiving at Jason and Moussa's package forwarding company. The shipping company's business model was simple: If someone in, say, Thailand wanted to buy an item on eBay, but the seller didn't ship there, the buyer could have the item shipped to the apartment in Tacoma, and the shipping company would forward it to Thailand for a fee. The business was one of many that cropped up in reaction to the growth of cross-border online shopping, as PayPal and e-commerce became more popular. It was stable work, and Lori loved being with Jason, who took her on long drives along the coast and encouraged her interest in computers. His brother Moussa, though, unnerved her. When she'd entered their apartment for the first time, Moussa ran into the living room yelling about how elated he was to meet her. He started shaking her hand vigorously, up and down and up and down, for an abnormal amount of time, and talking at double-speed. When he let go of her hand, he went straight to the window and started looking out the blinds. He seemed paranoid, on drugs maybe. Lori told Jason later that Moussa made her uncomfortable, but he told her not to worry about him. That was just the way his brother was.

Moussa could be inquisitive and warm, with what one ex-girlfriend described as "a little kid innocence" about his life in the States that betrayed his foreign upbringing. His laugh was infectious and boisterous, with a big, goofy smile. When he first moved to the US to study at Fresno State, he satisfied his excitement and curiosity about his new home country by traveling all around California. He was hungry for new experiences and new friendships, and he seemed to genuinely believe in the American dream, the idea that if he worked hard enough he could become rich. Moussa was smart and liked to read, though the majority of the books he read were about drugs, which his college girlfriend later confessed she found weird. Like Jason, he was a hard worker—he worked stints as a hotel janitor and a dishwasher at local bars and restaurants to make money while he was in school. But there was a dark side to American collegiate life that eventually pulled him under. For Moussa, casual college partying descended into hard drug use and skipping class. Though he was still on a student visa when Lori met Jason, Moussa had recently taken a leave of

absence to go stay in Tacoma with his younger brother and work on the package forwarding business.

Even though the condo was spacious, it was crowded with the three of them, so a few months later Lori and Jason moved by themselves into a smaller apartment in Tacoma. Lori thought the city was dirty and overrun with drug use, and she considered it a subpar knockoff of Seattle, the much better-known and more cosmopolitan Puget Sound city a half hour north. Jason worked late and was secretive about the specifics of the business; Lori didn't entirely understand how it operated, but since she worked in customer service she'd started noticing angry messages from customers claiming their money had been stolen. Jason wouldn't let her talk directly with the customers, instead instructing Lori to send them preplanned responses about their complaints. The job was easy and paid well, so she didn't ask many questions.

Soon, Lori noticed Jason would mysteriously disappear for long stretches of time, always on Fridays. He was cagey about where he'd been and Lori started getting suspicious, but when she finally confronted him, his answer surprised her: He wasn't going to see another woman, or doing any shady business deals, he said. He was going to the local mosque to pray. He was Muslim.

Lori was shocked; she knew Jason was from Morocco, a majority Muslim country, but when they first met he'd told her he was Christian.

"Why didn't you tell me you were Muslim?" she asked. It's not that it bothered her that he was Muslim—ever since moving out of her parents' home and leaving the Witnesses in 2004, she'd had no taste for organized religion, but tried not to foist that onto others—but it bothered her that he'd lied about it.

"I was worried you wouldn't want to be with me if you knew I was Muslim," Jason admitted. Lori was a Christian woman from the Midwest who'd never traveled outside of the country; he guessed, not incorrectly, that she knew very little about Islam.

"Besides, I am technically a Christian," Jason added. "I believe Jesus existed and that's enough to make me Christian." He also believed Muhammad was the Prophet, which is what made him Muslim, but Lori didn't argue. She'd spent her whole childhood being told what to believe about God, and it made her confused and resentful; she refused to do that to the people she loved. Besides, in her quest to understand her own beliefs

after being disfellowshipped from the Witnesses, Lori had read multiple religious texts, including some of the Quran. She wasn't religious, or looking to become religious again, but she was intellectually interested in religion as a subject. In the end, Lori didn't mind if Jason went to services at the mosque every Friday as long as he didn't force her to go with him.

Like the majority of Moroccans, Jason and the rest of the Elhassani family were Sunni Muslims, part of the largest branch of Islam observed by 85 to 90 percent of Muslims worldwide. Islam is an Abrahamic religion and Muslims believe in the words and teachings of the prophet Muhammad, who was born more than five hundred years after Jesus. There are five pillars of Sunni Islam: Shahada (declaration of faith), Salat (prayer, which is to be done five times a day), Zakat (giving to charity), Sawm (fasting during the holy month of Ramadan), and Hajj (making a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Prophet's birthplace). Like other Muslims, Jason and his family followed the Quran—a book of revelations from God as revealed to Muhammad that builds upon the Old and New Testaments—and the hadiths, a collection of teachings and advice from the Prophet and his followers.

Jason was one of a handful of Muslims in Washington State, which is comprised of only about 1 percent Muslim residents. Though he considered himself religious, Jason tended to observe quietly and in private, conscious of not bringing unwanted attention to himself from his white Christian neighbors. To Lori, he didn't appear to be outwardly religious, but instead seemed to attend mosque simply out of habit.

Lori went to the Islamic Center with Jason a few times to show her support and satisfy her curiosity. She found it strange that men and women were forced to pray in two separate rooms; the traditional gender roles espoused by Islam reminded her a lot of the ones she'd grown up with in the Witnesses. On one of her few visits to the mosque, one of the leaders refused to shake her hand, ostensibly because she was a woman, which left Lori feeling disrespected. According to the hadiths, a husband is considered the "guardian of [his] family," whereas a wife is "guardian of her husband's home and his children." To Lori, that sounded a lot like the oft-quoted Corinthians verse she'd grown up hearing at Witness meetings: "The head of a woman is the man."

Soon Lori discovered she was pregnant again. Now twenty-two, with a stable job and a doting partner, she decided she was ready to have the baby.

Though the two only talked on the phone about once a week now that they were living apart, Lori was excited to tell Sam the news. When Lori called her sister, Sam sounded happy but also a little bit jealous; even though Juan had given her stability she was unhappy with their life and constantly on the verge of leaving him.

Jason preferred being alone to being surrounded by friends and family and worked long hours, so Lori was worried about how he'd react when he found out she was pregnant. But when she told him, he was thrilled. He shifted immediately into protective parent mode, and together they decided they'd move out of Tacoma into a better neighborhood to raise their growing family. Jason started searching for a house in Portland, Oregon. To Lori, this seemed like the beginning of an amazing new life, one that promised financial stability, romantic partnership, and a level of physical safety she hadn't felt for a long time.

Things with Jason's brother Moussa, meanwhile, had reached a breaking point. Once he'd been a quirky but promising engineering student, but in the months since Lori had known Jason his behavior had grown increasingly erratic and his drug use had spiraled further out of control. When Lori was a few months pregnant, Moussa began skimming funds from the business to fund his habit and borrowing huge chunks of money from Jason that he blew on drugs—cocaine, weed, heroin—and never paid back. When he absconded to California with $8,000, and then began draining their shared business bank account while refusing to return any of his family members' phone calls, Jason was forced to shut down the shipping business and begin working for another older brother, Abdelillah, who lived in Southern California and ran an online business reselling camera equipment. Abdelillah could only afford to pay him $500 a month—barely enough to cover rent—so Lori applied for food stamps and WIC. Jason, who'd transferred to a local Portland-area college to study biology, could no longer afford his tuition and was forced to drop out. Still, Moussa's drug problem continued to snowball; he was shooting heroin, and totaled Jason's Volkswagen. Finally Jason and Abdelillah told their parents, who came from Morocco and rented an apartment nearby so that Moussa could move in and they could keep an eye on him. Lori hoped Moussa would be out of her life for good. She didn't want someone like that around her growing family.

Lori was excited about the way her new life—and family—was taking shape. Moving in with Jason so quickly had been a major risk, and it could've landed her in the same situations she'd been in with Tony: living below the poverty line, moving constantly, in a passionless relationship. Instead, it felt like her gamble on Jason was paying off, and her life was finally taking a turn for the better. They didn't have a ton of money, but Jason promised he'd get the package company up and running again, and Lori no longer felt burdened by the responsibility of being the only breadwinner—unlike with Tony, Jason was supporting her, not the other way around. With Jason, Lori believed she was finally getting what she'd wanted ever since leaving Lowell: A loving husband. A baby she could actually take care of. A family. When Lori was six months pregnant, she and Jason moved to Gresham, a small city about a twenty-minute drive east from Portland. At first, Jason doted on her. He helped her shower, brought her meals in bed, and together they watched every episode of *America's Got Talent*. When Lori felt well enough to get out of bed, the two of them would drive to the Willamette River so she could go swimming.

As Lori's due date approached, Jason's parents, Rkia and Mohammed, and his sister, Zahra, came to stay in Gresham so that they could help Lori prepare for the birth. Rkia took care of the cooking and cleaning while Jason worked. Zahra was only a couple of years younger than Lori, and the two got along well. But once Rkia and Zahra moved in nearby, Jason paid less and less attention to Lori, seemingly convinced that his mother and sister's presence in their home absolved him of having to care for his pregnant girlfriend. Late at night in August 2009, when Lori went into labor, she shook Jason awake and begged him to take her to the hospital. He obliged, but once she was checked into the labor ward, he told her he was leaving briefly to pick up his parents and would be back soon. He didn't return for hours. As Lori writhed in bed with ever-worsening contractions, she realized that she was going to give birth alone. On August 25, 2009, Lori gave birth to a baby girl, alone at the Providence Medical Center. She named her Cassidy. Hours after the birth, Jason and his parents finally showed up. Later, Zahra admitted privately to Lori that Jason had been late because he'd gotten caught up playing video games.

After Cassidy's birth, Jason grew even more distant. He began spending more time alone on his computer or playing video games with his headset on so that Lori couldn't talk to him. Zahra and Rkia would help when they

could, but the childcare was largely left to Lori, who—with no friends and a remote job working for Jason's brother Abdelillah in Los Angeles—was feeling increasingly isolated. It didn't feel all that different from her first months with Lanai, when she'd had some help from her parents but was mostly responsible for the baby herself.

Lori and Jason had been considering relocating to a house on the beach in Washington State, but it was 2009—the apex of the burst housing bubble—and Jason's parents were insistent that he and Lori take advantage of it. The rest of the Elhassani family had started snapping up cheap real estate around the Midwest and encouraged Jason to do the same. Jason suggested Chicago, but Lori didn't want to live there; the largest city she had ever lived in was Tacoma, and she'd spent the whole time there wishing they could move to somewhere remote near the beach. She thought Chicago was too dangerous a place to raise a family, so she told Jason that if they were going to move, they would have to go to a place that would be safer for her child. The two found a house in Elkhart, Indiana, a small city about a two-hour drive from Chicago. Lori was hesitant about the move; she wanted to live near the beach, not in the Midwest, and they had a newborn to think about. But Lori had been raised to be meek and subservient, and was still learning how to assert herself, particularly when it came to men. Ultimately she was no match for Jason's large, persuasive family. In October 2009, Jason's father, Mohammad, bought for $150,000 a three-story house (divided into two apartments) that had gone into foreclosure for Jason and Lori to live in, and with their three-month-old daughter in tow, they moved to Elkhart, Indiana, to start over once again. It was November 2009, and the two had been together for a little over a year.

Lori often called Sam to complain about Jason's growing distance, and the precarious position she seemed to have found herself in again. For a short time Lori had thought she was finally getting what she wanted—stability, a family, safe housing, a loving partner. But ever since Cassidy had been born, her life seemed to be changing course: Jason was distancing himself for reasons she couldn't understand, and she was facing starting over in another new town, this time with a baby. Just when things had started to look up for Lori, here they were, taking another turn for the worse.

Back in 1998, when Sam and Lori were in elementary school, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente had released a landmark study that would alter how psychologists and researchers, including Drs. Finkelhor and Browne, understood, studied, and treated childhood sexual abuse. The study identified ten different "Adverse Childhood Experiences," including abuse (emotional, physical, and sexual), household challenges (mother treated violently, substance abuse in the household, mental illness in the household, separation or divorce, and parental incarceration), and neglect (emotional or physical). These experiences can have lasting impacts, including increased risks for mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and PTSD, risky behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse and unsafe sex, and a lack of education, occupation, and income opportunities. The more adverse experiences a child has, the higher their chances are for developing physical and mental health problems as an adult.

Sam and Lori's childhood had been riddled with adverse experiences, including abuse and household challenges, and they'd never been given the resources or opportunity to cope with them. Now that Sam was settled down with Juan and her young son in Oklahoma, she began acting out in familiar ways, engaging in risky behaviors like alcohol abuse and experiencing deep waves of depression. Not long after Lori moved to Washington, Juan announced that he'd grown tired of Sam's constant "deception," as he called it, and the time she spent partying with her friends. In 2009, the two ended their relationship for good.

Lori threw herself into making a home in Elkhart, but she knew as soon as she arrived in November 2009 that it was no Portland. It was no Port Orchard or Lakeland or even Lowell. The city, once the RV-manufacturing capital of the US, had been leveled by the recession, and would soon have the worst unemployment rate in the nation. In Elkhart, Indiana, you worked a crappy job, and you lived in a clapboard house with a sagging roof, and you waited to die. That's how it felt to Lori, anyway. The yards were full of fast-food trash, cigarette packs, and the carcasses of old cars left to rot in the snow. It didn't feel like a good place to raise a family, but here she was. Lori had once been in thrall to her own family; now, sometimes, she felt she'd simply traded them for the Elhassanis, who'd dictated her and Jason's move to the Midwest. Lori, Jason, and baby Cassidy lived in a gray three-story house on North 2nd Street. The house had a pitched roof, a front

porch made of white latticework, and bay windows facing east that flooded the house with sunlight in the mornings.

Lori's new house was in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, across the street from a small Baptist church and a block over from a busy road with a Salvation Army, a McDonald's, and a southern-themed eatery called the Tipsy Biscuit. In the mornings Lori would load Cassidy into her stroller and walk down the street to nearby Langle Park, where neighborhood kids gathered to play pickup basketball and off-leash dogs chased each other across the open green. Elkhart's population was segregated—the Black families tended to live on South 2nd Street, while the white families lived on North 2nd Street—and the Elhassanis were one of the few Arab families in town. The local Muslim community was so small that Elkhart didn't have a mosque, so Jason had to drive nearly thirty minutes to South Bend.

Even though it had been more than eight years since 9/11, when the Elhassanis relocated to Elkhart in 2009, Muslims in the US continued to face high rates of discrimination. A Gallup poll conducted in 2010 found that "Muslims (48%) are more likely than Americans of other major religious groups to say they, personally, have experienced racial or religious discrimination in the past year." According to the same report, even Americans who believed they weren't prejudiced against Muslims still harbored anti-Islamic views, with one-third of all American respondents saying they had an "unfavorable opinion" of Islam. In fact, the number of Americans who had a "favorable" view of Islam decreased from 40 percent in November 2001 to 30 percent in August 2010, according to the Pew Research Center.

Anti-Muslim rhetoric was also being weaponized in a new and more egregious way by and against political leaders in the US. In 2008, throughout then-senator Barack Obama's presidential campaign, opponents frequently accused him of being Muslim, despite the fact that he was Christian. They used his middle name—Hussein—and family history as evidence that he had discreet ties to Islam, and frequently accused him of not even being born in America. The attacks continued even after Obama was elected, as opponents capitalized on preexisting Islamophobia to undermine his legitimacy. And in October 2009, four Republican senators held a press conference calling for an investigation of Muslim Capitol Hill interns. According to a 2009–2010 report issued by the Council on

American-Islamic Relations, “the four asserted that young people entering public service jobs were possibly spies.”

This was the charged climate the Elhassanis faced when they relocated to Elkhart, a time in which “two-thirds of the television coverage about Islam associates Muslims with extremism,” according to that same CAIR report. They had come from Morocco, a country that was approximately 99 percent Muslim, to live in a country that was only 0.8 percent Muslim. Jason and his brothers spoke English fluently and had lived in the US for years by then, but Elkhart seemed to constantly remind them that they were different from their neighbors, and not necessarily in a good way. Very few Indiana residents are born outside of the US and, to Lori and the Elhassanis, the anti-Muslim sentiment in Elkhart was palpable. By 2010, hate crimes against Muslims—rates of which had evened out in the last two years, but were still high—had been reinvigorated by a debate around the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” an Islamic cultural center two Muslim New Yorkers wanted to establish a few blocks from Ground Zero. In 2009, when Jason and Lori bought their house, Indiana was one of five states without hate crime legislation, making it impossible to quantify the number of hate crimes or Islamophobic acts committed against Muslims there. Indiana was also a state so comfortable with its own Islamophobia that when a city councilman near Elkhart was forced to resign after calling Muslims “goat humpers” on Facebook, he was replaced by another councilmember who declared on *his* Facebook page that Muslims should “adhere to our laws or LEAVE!” Like Lori and her family in Lowell when she was a child, Jason was isolated by the sheer fact of his religion; he had his family, but very few Muslim or Arab friends in the immediate area. It seemed like he was always looking over his shoulder.

In January 2010, three months into their new life in Elkhart, Lori was at home taking care of her newborn when two large police officers knocked on the front door. She put Cassidy down in her crib and crept into the vestibule to see what they wanted. They were immigration officers, they told her, and they were there to arrest someone named Yassine Elhassani for residing illegally in the United States.

Lori’s mouth fell open and waves of panic undulated through her; from inside the house, Cassidy started to cry. Who the fuck was Yassine Elhassani?

Yassine was Jason. Jason was Yassine. Maybe that wasn't so great a deception. But on top of not knowing his real name, Lori also had no idea that he was in the country illegally. As far as she knew, Jason was here on a legal student visa, and she told the officers that. They informed her his visa had lapsed when he dropped out of school in Washington and he was now a "deportable alien."

Yassine was at work when ICE arrived, and Lori managed to convince them that this was simply a paperwork snafu, and that they would get it sorted out as soon as possible. When Yassine got home that night, she barraged him with questions: Why didn't he tell her his real name? (He said he'd taken the Westernized version, Jason, to make it easier for Americans to pronounce.) Why hadn't he told her he was in the US illegally? (He claimed not to know that his visa had lapsed.) Lori knew she could either excise Yassine from her life entirely and face the world as a single mother with a spotty work history and a high school diploma in the middle of an economic collapse, or she could choose to believe him. So a few weeks later, after Lori's divorce from Tony officially went through—she'd finally gotten around to filing for it a few months prior—they went to the Elkhart Justice of the Peace. Lori and Yassine were married, which allowed Lori to file for his permanent US residency. A few weeks after that, Lori discovered she was pregnant again, this time with a son.

With his visa issues in the process of being resolved, Yassine and his older brother Abdelillah, who lived in California, got to work establishing the same kind of package forwarding company Yassine had run in Washington. Starting the business under a new name in Indiana meant the brothers could take advantage of a recent job-creation tax credit that had been created in reaction to the recession and was being applied to any small businesses incorporated in Indiana that provided jobs. Though she didn't know it then, the shipping company would soon be the site of dramatic conflict between Lori and her sister.

In May 2010, Yassine rented an airy warehouse a ten-minute drive from the house and moved the business out of his and Lori's home. He hired a handful of warehouse workers to manage the package influx and customer service, including his brother Moussa, whose parents had bought him a house in Elkhart a few miles from Yassine's, and who was still struggling with substance abuse.

It wasn’t long after opening the warehouse that Yassine just stopped going to work. He’d always had occasional spells of depression, but this was different. In the mornings when Lori would get out of bed to make Cassidy breakfast, Yassine would stay behind with the curtains drawn, the blankets souring with his sweat. When he finally managed to get out of bed in the late afternoon, it was only so he could move to the couch, where he’d play PlayStation late into the night. With few friends around, gaming seemed to be the only thing that made him feel better. As a young Moroccan man from a conservative family, he had grown up with immense stigma surrounding conversations about mental health. And even if Yassine had wanted help, his visa status was still pending, drastically limiting his access to treatment. The federal Public Charge rule meant that if Yassine was found to have accessed public health benefits while staying in the country, the government had the right to deny his visa; even though this rule only relates to public benefits, it often scares immigrants like Yassine away from seeking any kind of treatment for fear of government reprisal.

With her husband sinking deeper into depression, Lori was six months pregnant and trying to raise a toddler. She’d recently started building a wooden fence around their small yard, so Cassidy, her baby brother, and any pets would one day have a space to play in. But when Yassine stopped working, there wasn’t enough managerial oversight at the shipping company, and his business partner and brother Abdelillah—who still lived in California but controlled the company’s cash flow—threatened to cut Yassine off. When Yassine still refused to go to work, Lori agreed to go in his stead. Each morning she’d leave Cassidy behind with Yassine to spend grueling twelve-hour shifts at the warehouse sifting packages and managing the ragtag staff.

Lori had to make money for the family, but she also hated leaving Cassidy alone with Yassine. Some days, she later claimed, she would come home for lunch and find Cassidy strapped in her car seat, wearing a dirty diaper and covered in crusted yogurt, while Yassine played video games. These types of incidents put even more strain on their marriage, which was already crumbling.

As Yassine’s depression worsened, he also grew more conservative and controlling, becoming increasingly critical of Lori and her lifestyle as an independent American woman. He slowly became more dismissive of Lori and lost his temper over minor inconveniences. He called her names. If they

went for a walk in the park, and she couldn't keep up because she was tired from her pregnancy, Yassine would just leave her there, making a beeline for the car, getting in and driving off before she could catch up. Lori thought the behavior was due to his depression, or his addiction to violent and misogynistic video games like *Grand Theft Auto*; she tried speaking with his family about it, but they didn't find it concerning. Boys will be boys, they said. So she soldiered on.

In August 2010, when Lori was seven months pregnant, she and Yassine were invited to be in a friend's wedding. Yassine's mother took Lori shopping and together they picked out an elegant matching dress and tux. But on the day of the wedding, as Lori was finishing up getting ready, Yassine stormed into the bathroom in his underwear.

"What are you doing?" she asked when she saw him, turning back to the mirror to finish applying her lipstick. "We need to leave soon or we'll be late."

"You look like a whore," he spat. "You think I'm going to go out in public with you when you look like that?" He turned around and left her there, limply holding a tube of lipstick, and locked himself in the bedroom.

Lori was floored. As much as their relationship had deteriorated at that point, she'd never expected such contempt from him. And the dress she'd picked out—black, floor-length, with red accents—had been chosen with the help of Yassine's own mother. Lori attended the wedding alone; instead of her husband, her dog, Zserbo, a miniature bull terrier she'd bought on Craigslist a few months earlier, walked her down the aisle.

Things got worse from there. Yassine's verbal abuse became physical, Lori later said: During heated arguments he pushed her up against walls or slapped her across the face. This was not what Lori wanted out of a marriage, or her life, but she felt trapped. Yassine was the father of her children, and he owned the business that provided her sole source of income. Leaving him would cost her and her children so much. It couldn't possibly be worth it.

No matter where she was or who she was with, Sam always had a nagging feeling that life, real life, was happening elsewhere. In Oklahoma, working as a dispatcher at the same trucking company she'd worked at as a teenager, she felt like she was missing it. Sam was getting ready to run

again—but she had no idea that what she would run toward would be far worse than anything that had come before.

After breaking up with Juan, Sam had a series of brief live-in relationships with men before she met Rafael LeBron. Raf was a burly, bushy-bearded New Yorker, a long-haul trucker like her dad, and within a month they'd moved in together, along with her son. New York: The very fact of his origins made Raf seem cosmopolitan to her in a way other boyfriends hadn't been, and she couldn't help but embellish her biography to impress him. Yes, she had graduated from high school, she told him. College, also. She was hardworking, business-minded. She wanted to succeed.

In reality, Sam was suffering. Their Tulsa apartment was tucked behind a mini storage facility, just a five-minute walk from a busy road dotted with chain restaurants. Feral cats roamed their litter-strewn neighborhood, called Stevenson, and the high crime rate meant Sam preferred to stay inside. She eventually admitted to Raf that she'd had a troubled childhood and struggled with drug use—weed and painkillers, mostly, but sometimes meth—and mood swings. She told him about her childhood abuse, about her violent marriage to Robert, and about what had happened with the gang in Arkansas. Later, Raf would think Sam seemed fundamentally broken—like "deep inside there was something wrong with her."

Sam was lonely in Tulsa. Raf was gone for days at a time on his trucking routes while Sam stayed at home smoking weed and watching Michael. Sometimes if she got super antsy, or Michael wouldn't stop whining, she'd bundle him up and take him to watch the ducks at the lake at nearby LaFortune Park. Staring out across the water, she found it harder and harder to distract herself from the things that had happened to her. Life had slowed to a quiet hum, and whenever Sam was alone and sober, she was haunted by her past.

Though Sam clearly loved her son, Raf worried her drug use interfered with her ability to care for him. She was smoking weed every day, and usually slept during the day and stayed up all night. Michael struck him as desperate for a father figure. The very first time Sam brought him to meet Raf, Raf was shocked by how assertive Michael was, almost as if he were the parent and Sam were the child. Only four years old, he confidently strode up to Raf and asked, "Do you like my mom?"

Raf was caught off guard. "Sure," he responded.

“You gonna treat her right?” Michael drawled, giving Raf a tough stare with his big turtle eyes.

“Yeah? Absolutely,” Raf responded.

Michael stood on his tiptoes and planted a kiss on Raf’s cheek, then he turned to his mother and did the same. “Now both of you kiss,” he ordered. Raf hesitated, then leaned in and kissed Sam. “Now we’re a family,” Michael declared. Raf loved him right away.

Raf had two kids from a previous relationship and it was important to him to be a good role model for them and for Michael, but he didn’t think Sam took her job as a mother as seriously as she should. Once, when they were out at a restaurant, Michael told her he had to use the bathroom, but Sam told him he better hold it or she’d spank him.

“But he’s a kid, he has to go,” Raf told her. “Besides, all you give him to drink is sweet tea, and tea is a diuretic.”

“I don’t care,” Sam responded. “He’s thirsty. Let him drink the tea.”

Raf later said, “There were times where she was like [to him], ‘Get away. Get outta here.’ There were also times where I’d notice she’d hug him, kiss him, and never let him go and seemed so happy…. It was like an up and down.”

Raf decided he wasn’t interested in being with someone like that, someone who committed as much attention to casually flirting with men in the checkout line as she did to raising her son. They had only been together for a few months, but the two were already pulling away from each other.

In Elkhart, Lori had her own relationship troubles. It was May 2011 and her marriage to Yassine had continued to deteriorate, only a year and some months after their wedding. After she gave birth to their son, Mac, in November 2010, Yassine had gone back to work at the shipping company, leaving Lori to care for the kids while also working part-time at the warehouse. Sam was worried about her younger sister—from everything Lori had told her about them, Yassine and his brothers seemed dangerous and untrustworthy. Lori said her brother-in-law Moussa was on drugs and constantly causing trouble at their workplace, and Yassine had grown increasingly distant, only paying attention to Lori to yell at or threaten her. He was despondent and withdrawn and refused to get help. Lori told Sam he’d shoved her a few times, and she’d sometimes seen him watching angry-sounding lectures in Arabic. “The Elhassanis are terrorists,” Sam

joked, after her sister told her about yet another suspicious package that had come through the warehouse. “And Moussa is the craziest one of all.”

One evening, after many nights spent arguing over Sam’s increasing marijuana use, she and Raf decided to call it quits. When she called Lori to tell her the news, her sister proposed an idea: Sam could come live in the spare apartment at Lori’s house and work in the warehouse at the shipping company. Lori was working there part-time as a manager, and Sam could come in and help with shipping and logistics. In exchange, Sam would support Lori while she tried to work things out with Yassine.

For the first time in a long time, the sisters found themselves in similar situations, estranged from their partners, needing each other in a way they hadn’t since they were kids. All at once that old ferocity of longing came rushing back. That night, on the phone with Lori, Sam decided to move to Elkhart.

Chapter Four

In June 2006, the al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed by a US air strike, and the umbrella council of extremist networks that he'd run—Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin—named Abu Ayyub al-Masri as his replacement. An Egyptian explosives expert who'd trained in Afghanistan under Osama bin Laden, al-Masri was so secretive that his own wife claimed she didn't even know he was involved with al-Qaeda in Iraq until he was appointed al-Zarqawi's replacement. Hoping to continue al-Zarqawi's mission of cleansing Iraq of Shias and Western influence in an effort to return it to the time of the Prophet, al-Masri and his colleagues made the fateful decision to merge the Majlis into one extremist supergroup. On October 15, 2006, the Islamic State in Iraq was officially born, and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was named its leader.

Between 2006 and 2011, the year Sam relocated to Elkhart to live with Lori and the Elhassani family, the Islamic State in Iraq continued to consolidate its power, with much of it concentrated in Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. When Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi were both killed in a joint operation by the US and Iraq in April 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was named the group's new leader.

Al-Baghdadi had been the leader of another group under the Majlis named Jamaat Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamaah. A former Muslim Brotherhood recruit who was born in Iraq in the 1970s, al-Baghdadi spent 2004 interred with other al-Qaeda leaders at the notorious American prison Camp Bucca in the vicinity of Al Qasr, Iraq. It was at that prison, which later became known as "the birthplace of ISIS," that al-Baghdadi and other future ISIS leaders reportedly hatched their plan for establishing a Caliphate. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would lead ISIS for nearly a decade, driving the group in a charge across Iraq and into Syria, where Sam would eventually end up.

But while al-Baghdadi was on the battlefield leading military operations, another jihadist had become al-Zarqawi's spiritual successor after his death. Anwar al-Awlaki was an American-born, al-Qaeda-affiliated imam whose lectures began to spread like wildfire across the internet in the early-2000s. Al-Awlaki ran his own website and blog, where he would post his musings and audio and video lectures. When Facebook launched in

2004, it wasn't equipped to handle the influx of extremist content that quickly found a home there. Even after platforms like Facebook and YouTube beefed up their moderation strategies, they were no match for internet-savvy terrorists, who continued to upload content from al-Awlaki and other extremist imams, which was then passed between terror cells over encrypted text messaging apps. Whereas al-Zarqawi was "a terrorist who migrated some of his activity to the internet, rather than himself emerging out of an online radical milieu," noted the researcher Maura Conway, al-Awlaki emerged out of the collection of fervent internet jihadists who had "taken up the banner of online violent jihad" after al-Zarqawi's death. His fluency in both English and Arabic meant that he was a powerful tool for recruiting Muslims from all over the globe.

As a Yemeni-American himself, al-Awlaki was relatable to third-culture kids like the Elhassani brothers, people who had split their childhood and young adulthood between the dichotomous lifestyles of the East and West. The son of a Fulbright scholar, al-Awlaki was born in New Mexico and spent time in both Yemen and the US, eventually studying civil engineering at Colorado State University. In 1993, after a trip to Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion, he returned to the States newly committed to his religion, and in the mid- to late-nineties, he became an imam. Awlaki spent time as an imam at mosques in San Diego and Washington, D.C., and was interrogated for several days after 9/11 when the FBI discovered two of the hijackers had attended his mosque in San Diego. Though the American government never found direct evidence linking al-Awlaki to the hijackers or to al-Qaeda, the negative attention was enough to drive him out of the US to a mosque in the UK, before he relocated to Yemen in 2004.

Like all terrorists, there was no one incident that caused al-Awlaki to radicalize and begin officially working with al-Qaeda; instead, it was a slow process. As the *New York Times*'s Scott Shane noted, "al-Awlaki claims that he never changed; instead, al-Awlaki says that it was the world around him that changed, citing as evidence the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen." In 2006, he spent a year and a half in prison before he was released without being charged. Al-Awlaki believed the American government had pressured the Yemeni government to arrest him, and after his release he became increasingly hostile against the US. In 2008 he published public support for the Somali Islamic militant group al-Shabaab on his website, and in 2009 he published the disturbing listicle "44

Ways to Support Jihad," which included religious justification for violence against the West.

Because he had personal knowledge of the identity struggle many American-born Muslims may face, al-Awlaki was masterful at weaponizing the feelings of not fitting in fully within either culture and turning them into a toxic stew that he tended to with every new audio recording or posting to his blog, called *Imam Anwar's Blog*. By the late-aughts, al-Awlaki's viral videos called for jihad against the United States outright and exhorted Muslims across the world to join the cause of fighting against the infidels. His fluency in both English and Arabic meant he could reach not just those living in the Middle East and North Africa, where Arabic is the predominant language, but also Western countries like the United States. One of his most notorious videos, *Call to Jihad*, attempts to convince Muslims that it is their religious duty to kill Americans. Another, *The Battle of Hearts and Minds*, was delivered by al-Awlaki in Yemen in 2008, uploaded online to his blog, and later co-opted for use in ISIS propaganda videos. It argued that the US is engaged in an ideological war to make Muslims in the West "moderate," and promoted fighting back with "the jihad of the word and jihad of wealth." It's because of this watered-down version of Islam, al-Awlaki reasoned, that Muslims must band together to create an Islamic State, governed by Islamic laws. Though the speech predated the official establishment of ISIS's "worldwide caliphate" by six years, it deftly predicted its existence. As al-Awlaki put it: "The idea of establishing the Islamic rule and establishing Khilafah on earth, now is not any more talk, it is action!"

The worldwide explosion of internet accessibility also meant that al-Awlaki's violent calls for jihad could spread to more people than al-Zarqawi could have ever thought possible when he first started uploading al-Qaeda in Iraq content in 2004. By 2010, the year before Sam moved to Indiana, there were nearly 2 billion internet users worldwide, up from 361 million in 2000. Smartphones, like Apple's iPhone, first released in 2007, were also growing in popularity, allowing people to access the internet whenever and wherever. Through social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, al-Awlaki's murderous messages were broadcast into homes across the globe. Soon they would travel all the way to Elkhart, Indiana.

From the outside, Lori's gray house on North 2nd Street looked like a single-family home, but on the inside it was divided into two separate side-by-side three-story apartment units. Lori and Yassine lived in one, and soon Sam and Michael settled into the other. Her sister had described the house proudly, as if it were some kind of mansion, but when Sam arrived she found it claustrophobic and filthy, below her standards. She felt the job Lori had secured for her was also subpar—her brother-in-law owned the business, but Sam was only making minimum wage. And Elkhart was so depressing. It was June by then, and the weather was starting to take on the familiar humidity of Midwest summers; when she took Michael for walks to the nearby Dairy Queen for lunch, Sam's long, dark hair stuck to the back of her neck and sweat pooled in her bra. At night the apartment was filled with the sounds of domestic despair reverberating from her sister's place next door: Lori and her husband's tireless fighting, the baby wailing, the loud bang of machine-gun fire from whatever video game Yassine was playing that night.

Lori was distracted with the business and her young children and her imploding marriage, and Sam didn't know anybody in Elkhart aside from Lori and the revolving cast of Elhassani family members that were always at the warehouse or popping by to see Yassine. Sam met Yassine's parents, Rkia and Mohammed, who seemed nice if a little overbearing, and his sister, Zahra, who was sociable like her and only a few years younger. She also met the notorious Moussa, whom Lori had complained about ever since she first started dating Yassine back in Washington. He seemed pretty harmless to her. Sam, who was more naturally outgoing, had always felt like her sister was unnecessarily suspicious and critical of new people; every person Lori met was put through an emotional gauntlet to earn her trust. Sam preferred the opposite approach: Trust until the person gives you a reason not to.

Sam was gutsy and impulsive and overconfident, and from an early age she'd been a chameleon, able to quickly discern what someone wanted and tailor her personality accordingly. When she was younger and in the presence of her parents, she was the pious daughter, reciting Bible passages from memory and dutifully completing her chores. As she entered her teen years—what Witnesses call "the bloom of youth," a quote taken from the Bible—Sam started sneaking out with her friends, with whom she was an adventurous loudmouth, constantly taking risks. Like Lori, she'd lost her

virginity to an older man who raped her when she was fifteen. After that, the boyfriends had come in quick succession.

Moussa was cut from the same cloth as her ex-husband, Robert, and many of the others, though Sam didn't know it then. She thought he was cute but a little insane: exactly her type. One warm summer night a few days after she moved to Elkhart, he asked her if she'd like to go swimming, and she said yes. They'd just finished their shift at the shipping company's warehouse, where Moussa supervised package shipping and receiving. It was still light enough to drive without headlights, and as they weaved through the streets of Elkhart, past boarded-up houses and overgrown fields, Sam put her hand out the window to feel the summer heat. She looked over at Moussa in the driver's seat, and he flashed her a smile.

Moussa took her to a small man-made waterfall in High Dive Park, a recreation area along the St. Joseph River where Elkhart residents picnicked, fished, and watched their kids tear across the playground from the relief of the shade. The streetlamps were on and it was close enough to the bike path for people to see them when they rode by, but Sam and Moussa were high on the buzz of a new crush. When he asked her to go skinny-dipping, she said yes.

That night, after Moussa dropped her back home at the house on North 2nd Street, Sam rushed to tell Lori about how much fun she had had with him. "You had him all wrong," she exclaimed. "He's so nice!" She felt giddy, alive with possibility. Her sister was predictably negative. "Moussa is trouble," Lori told Sam. "Possibly even dangerous. You need to stay away from him."

Sam had only known Moussa for a short while, but she thought she was a good judge of character, and he seemed so charming; she worried that Lori's opinion of Moussa was unfairly shaped by her curdling relationship with Yassine. Moussa was nothing like his brother. He was outgoing, with a raffish air. He worked out often and shared Sam's interest in souped-up cars. He laughed easily and had a magnetic energy. The two were from different worlds but they were so similar, down to their intermittent piousness: Like Sam, Moussa was forever trapped in a cycle of sin and repentance. He drank and did drugs and had premarital sex, he lied and stole and cursed. But every Friday he also washed his hands, his feet, and the insides of his nose, and got down on his knees in the mosque to pray.

Like Sam, Moussa really did seem to want to be a good person. It's just that *pretending* to be a good person was so much easier.

Within days of their skinny-dipping excursion, she and Moussa were inseparable; within a month, she was living with him, just like she always had with her boyfriends. Moussa had a two-story salmon-colored house on a brick-lined stretch of South 2nd Street a mile away from Lori's. The house was adjacent to a vacant lot, and the exterior of each window was stamped with recessed hearts, perhaps a symbol of the happy life Sam felt awaited them there. After moving in, she and Moussa took a trip to Tulsa to pick up the rest of the things she'd left at Raf's house. When Raf opened the door, he barely recognized her: Within just a couple of weeks, Sam had lost a tremendous amount of weight, and he thought she looked like "a junkie." Moussa was there, standing behind her and recording with a video camera, which seemed strange and paranoid to Raf; he thought Moussa seemed like a "troublemaker" and that both of them seemed like they were on drugs. When Raf refused to let Sam take some things he said were his, Sam called the police. When they arrived, they asked Raf how well he knew Sam and Moussa.

"I've only known her for a few months, and I don't know him at all," Raf responded. Then the officer asked Moussa if he had any drugs on him, to which Moussa replied no. Sam and Moussa quickly gathered the rest of Sam's things and piled into the car. As they pulled away from his apartment, Raf thought: "This kid's trash." He worried Sam was headed down a dangerous path—and bringing Michael with her—but there was nothing he could do.

Settled in Elkhart, Sam quickly ingratiated herself to the entire Elhassani family, that old desire to be accepted flaring up again, despite her sister's protests. Sam made fast friends with Zahra, had the other brothers of the Elhassani family swooning over her, and through pure charm earned a promotion to a management position at the shipping company. Yassine and Lori were both working part-time while taking care of the kids, and Lori was still technically a manager, which put her and Sam in competition with each other.

As soon as Sam started at the shipping company, she'd quickly made friends with the staff and proven herself to be a hard worker. She formed a tight-knit social circle with the other women who worked there—two women her age named Cassie and Nikki, and an older woman named

Andria—and often hung out with them outside of the warehouse, going joyriding to the beach or shopping at the University Park Mall. “I work with the most awesome group of people!” Andria wrote on Facebook around that time. “Nowhere else would a boss be so understanding of what I am going through right now and be so supportive! I love you girls!” Andria tagged the three women, then added, “See your smiling faces in the morning!”

Sam had always been surrounded by friends, even though Witness literature warns against becoming close companions with anyone outside the faith. Because their parents had worked so much, Sam and Lori were often left unsupervised during the summers, and Sam would invite her school friends over to hang out in the barn. Sam’s friends were the popular girls of Kirksey Middle School, with glossy ponytails and names like Rhonda and Shayna. They had a better command of pop culture, but Sam was pretty and friendly enough to ingratiate herself. The girls showed her how to headbang to Nirvana and shared their tinted Lip Smackers, which Sam wasn’t allowed to have.

Sam’s girlfriends taught her everything her parents had never told her about the world: how to roll the tops of your shorts so a scandalous sliver of stomach showed, how to do the “Genie in a Bottle” dance, what a blowjob was and how to give one.

Even back then Lori didn’t have many friends, so she usually tagged along with her sister. Sam’s friends mostly ignored or mocked Lori, who was always there, watching. Though she was the younger sister, Lori was protective of Sam and suspicious of her so-called friends. Sam tried to include Lori when her friends came to hang out, but her sister was painfully awkward and shy, a solemn presence in an otherwise outgoing group of teenage girls. It was exhausting to Sam, Lori’s good-girl schtick. Sam didn’t understand why she couldn’t just lighten up.

When Sam was promoted to manager at the shipping company’s warehouse, she began to egregiously flout the rules and the sisters started to clash. Though both sisters were technically managers, Lori worked only part-time, which meant Sam had the upper hand when it came to the staff. As her relationship with Yassine deteriorated, Lori was also losing her footing within the Elhassani family power structure, which she was beginning to realize was more important to her continued employment than actually being good at her job.

Lori had created an employee handbook that included a dress code, which specified that workers couldn't wear open-toed shoes on the warehouse floor, to minimize risk of injury. Sam chafed at the rule—in Elkhart, as in Arkansas, or Oklahoma, or Florida, her little sister was not going to tell her what to do. A few weeks after being promoted, she and the other warehouse workers she'd befriended staged a protest for their right to wear flip-flops to work. Sam and Zahra—who had quickly allied with Sam—purposefully showed up in clothes that broke the dress code: tank tops, shorts, and flip-flops. Lori tried to fire them, but they went straight to Abdelillah and pleaded their case. Even though he lived in Los Angeles, his initial investment into the business meant he was technically the owner, and Zahra was his sister. Of course he took their side. He reinstated them and demoted Lori instead.

The shipping company where they all worked wasn't exactly expertly run. The year before, in 2010, the USPS had put a temporary quarantine on the company for failing to follow postal regulations, like filing the appropriate customs and identification forms for each shipment. The move essentially froze all of the company's shipments, and the Elkhart County post office began filling up with packages shipped to the company's warehouse that they couldn't release because of the quarantine. Customer packages were held in postal limbo for so long that it caught the attention of a tech blogger named Robin Monks, who wrote a blog post about the ordeal. The post was immediately flooded with angry commenters eager to share their negative experience with the shipping company.

"They never shipped out my packages!" wrote one user named "Jake." "Tried to call them over 100 times the last 2 weeks and NOTHING, NO ONE PICKS UP THE PHONE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I emailed them and NOTHING, NO ONE REPLYS. The only reply was from a BOT message, the same message giving me a run around. They take your packages, they take your money that you wire them for shipping. SCAM."

"Their business practices are dishonest, their service unprofessional and their reputation shot," wrote another user named "BR."

Monks didn't think that the shipping company was up to anything nefarious, necessarily—they just seemed totally inept. The brothers saw a package forwarding company as a way to make quick money but had no idea how to actually operate it. Monks also thought it was strange that they would start a shipping business in the Midwest, when the most lucrative

package forwarding companies were always on the border with Canada, where the shorter distance to the next country meant the cost to ship is minimal.

Even after the shipping company settled some of the complaints against it, Monks's damning post remained up, gathering comments from angry customers. A year later, things had only gotten worse at the company. The items coming through the warehouse on their way to foreign countries were increasingly suspect and would occasionally be mislabeled. Lori and some of the other warehouse workers say they raised concerns with Yassine about the inventory, but on several occasions he insisted they weren't doing anything illegal.

Angela Benke, an Indiana native in her fifties with an auburn bob who worked in the shipping department, said she approached Yassine directly with her concerns. Though she'd worked there since the shipping company's opening, Benke had begun to dislike Yassine. She hated Moussa even more; Sam, who worked in the same department as Angie, had once told her that she wanted to leave him, but that she was scared he'd kill her.

"You could lose your business," Angie told Yassine, the next time an illegal shipment came through the warehouse. Yassine dismissed her concerns, and insisted she send the stuff anyway; she told him if he wanted it shipped, he could do it himself.

In January 2011, an anonymous customer had filed a complaint with the Indiana Attorney General's office against the shipping company for its business practices, and in April WSBT.com, a local news site, wrote an article about the shipping company titled "Elkhart company under investigation after complaints filed from around the world." WSBT.com wrote, "According to the attorney general's office, they have received complaints from all over the world, including Canada, Russia, Australia, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. The Better Business Bureau has 45 complaints on file and in just four months the Elkhart County Sheriff's office has received 180 complaints."

By late 2011, the Elkhart police had started making regular visits to the shipping company. Monks, the tech blogger who'd originally exposed the company's bad business practices, got in contact with Ray Caples, who was the Elkhart county sheriff at the time. "I believe a lot of the problem has been caused by panic, stirred by people [who] post on the internet, that [the shipping company] is a scam or fraud," Caples told Monks. "[It] is neither

of these, but they are a terribly run organization." Andria Lightner, one of Sam's friends and a fellow coworker, recalled Homeland Security once swarming the warehouse in their black SUVs and dark suits in a scene "like a movie." People all over the world were filing fraud reports, listing stolen items. Lori did her best to clean up the mess: She developed a close relationship with the police, calling them any time she thought a customer was using a stolen credit card. Once a week they'd show up and confiscate the packages—sometimes a hundred or more—that Lori had marked as purchased with a stolen credit card.

Customer complaints poured in about disappearing packages. Message boards and social media lit up with claims that the shipping company was an elaborate scam. Customers complained of lost packages and stolen PayPal money orders, of being wildly overcharged. Angry users took to the web to vent their frustrations: "Worst address forwarding service PERIOD." Another unhappy customer advised avoiding the company altogether.

Lori believed all the missing packages could be traced to a single source: Her sister's new love interest, Moussa. Even before Sam had moved to Indiana, Moussa had begun to help himself to anything he wanted from the warehouse: video games and equipment, electronics, jewelry. Moussa would take the customers' items, then claim the package never arrived; when the customer would call to inquire about their order, he would blame whoever had signed for the package, and claim they were stealing. Lori could see through him but was powerless to stop any of it—it wasn't as if the Elhassani brothers were going to believe Yassine's American wife over their brother.

As Sam's role at the company grew, Lori worried that she was being used to put a legitimate sheen on what she thought was an illegitimate business. Sam had quickly become an integral part of the shipping company's success, carrying out many of the tasks—such as forwarding shipments of unknown packages—in lieu of the Elhassani brothers. She knew Moussa was stealing products from the warehouse to resell, but always covered for him. When detectives came into the warehouse and Lori wasn't around, Moussa sent Sam to talk to them. She would be able to handle the police better, they reasoned.

"The police are racist," Moussa told Sam. "And hearing it from an American woman will alleviate any suspicion."

Sam couldn’t argue with that; from spending time with the Elhassanis, she now knew US law enforcement had a documented history of profiling, surveilling, and discriminating against Muslims. But she was still confused. “Suspicion of what?” she asked. Like Lori, she was unclear on what, exactly, the brothers’ business was up to. Her job was to follow orders, which she did—sometimes to a fault.

“We just want to get paid for the packages,” Moussa told her. And that was that.

Lori still believed the majority of the business was honest work, forwarding harmless and legal packages abroad, but Sam had become so enthralled by Moussa that Lori would never be able to convince her sister to disentangle herself.

Sam had done what she’d always done: used her charisma and good humor to charm her way into the Elhassani family, ignoring her sister’s warnings. She saw firsthand how Yassine treated Lori, but Moussa was different, wasn’t he? He lavished her with praise and gifts like cars and designer clothes and handbags, some of which he’d taken from the shipping company’s warehouse. Early on Sam realized that the key to their relationship was patience: If she could manage to keep herself from nagging him, she would eventually get what she wanted. It was all very calculated and intentional; he knew how to manipulate her, but she knew how to manipulate him, too. In late 2011, when Sam decided she wanted to upgrade the BMW he’d gotten her, for example, she showed him a picture of the one she wanted online and said, “Honey, look at this beautiful BMW! If only I could drive that I would feel like a queen!” After he looked she closed the photo and muttered to herself, softly but not so softly that he couldn’t hear, “I guess I’ll just have to work hard to save up!”

A week later Moussa flew to Atlanta and, using his family’s money, bought her that exact car.

Moussa was seductive and well spoken, able to allay with a few carefully chosen phrases any fears Sam had about her life or their relationship. She felt secure with him, but unlike other men she’d been with, Moussa never bored her. He was vivacious, courageous, a born thrill-seeker constantly on the lookout for the next adrenaline rush. But he also had a streak of perfectionism that could occasionally paralyze him: When he bought a used Porsche, for example, it stayed at the dealership until every single rusty bolt could be replaced. Minute issues most people would

brush off became major stressors for him; Sam would tell people that he was the type who would throw away a million-dollar vase with a crack in it.

But his self-destructiveness didn't faze Sam, and most times she felt she could balance it out. Plus, Moussa seemed to really love Michael, always spoiling him with the best clothes and toys, like a tricycle that looked like a dinosaur. Even though he wasn't Michael's biological father—Juan was still in Oklahoma and interacted with Michael only through occasional phone calls—Moussa made a genuine effort to make Michael feel included in their lives, happy to have him tag along when he took Sam out to lunch or dinner. Moussa wasn't in a rush to have more kids—he loved his freedom too much—but he seemed happy with the little family unit the three of them were creating.

As Sam and Moussa grew closer throughout 2011, Lori and Yassine were drifting further apart. Yassine had given up entirely on saving their marriage. His violence was escalating; whereas before he'd been careful not to leave visible marks on her body when he hit her, she later said he began to leave handprints and bruises on her arms and legs, even her face. Yassine told her that he was growing closer to his Muslim faith, and that was causing the two to grow apart—but when Lori sought guidance from a local imam in an attempt to repair their damaged relationship, Yassine refused to talk to him. He wasn't so much growing more *religiously* conservative as he was growing *culturally* conservative, turning away from what he perceived as American sex, substances, and loose morals and toward the strictest possible guidelines about how to live and how to behave. He didn't pray, attend mosque, fast, or give to charity, but he did tell Lori how she should dress (conservatively) and frequently remind her through both physical and verbal abuse that as the man, he was in charge. He drank, breaking one of Islam's fundamental rules about keeping your body pure, but he also was quick to cite the Quran's Surah An-Nisa, which stated: "Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them first, if they persist, do not share their beds, but if they still persist, then discipline them gently. But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great."

Yassine had a loose definition of the term “gently.” Lori often felt that he cherrypicked the more patriarchal parts of his religion to justify how he treated her, casting aside all the other parts about generosity and love and kindness. In that way, it reminded her a lot of her Witness childhood. Surah An-Nisa was not that dissimilar from the Bible’s Colossians 3:18 passage, often quoted by Witnesses. “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” This wasn’t about God, it was about control—specifically control of women.

Lori had always been supportive of Yassine’s Muslim identity; though she’d never officially converted—growing up as a Witness had left her skeptical about organized religion—she was fine with him raising their children in the faith. But what Lori saw as Yassine’s descent into a warped strain of Islam—one that emphasized female submission and male superiority over the actual tenets of the faith—was unnerving, and reminded her of her mother’s conversion to the Witnesses when Lori was a child. Lisa had been born into a strict Mormon family in Texas but converted to the Witnesses when Sam and Lori were very young. Before her conversion, Lisa had been much more relaxed and playful. She would belt the Carpenters on long road trips, take the girls to the circus, help them decorate masks made out of paper bags. She made them matching dresses stitched with brightly colored flowers and parrots. When Richard was on the road, Sam and Lori would climb into Lisa’s bed with her, falling asleep every night to the sound of Rocky and Bullwinkle on the ancient TV. After Lisa joined the Witnesses, all that stopped, and the girls watched the color drain from their mother’s life.

Now it seemed the same sort of extremism had a grip on her husband. Like Lisa, Yassine seemed to no longer have room for nuance: Everything was black-and-white, right or wrong, *halal* or *haram*. And those who disagreed with his sexist ideologies needed to either be converted or excised from their lives entirely. It was this fundamentalism—an undying devotion to an extremely rigid interpretation of scripture—that had made Lori leave the Witnesses. Now, years later, she was encountering that same harmful zealousness in another state, another religion, and another person.

Yassine’s deepening conservatism often caused fights. One night in June 2011, soon after Sam had arrived, Lori was getting ready to go out to dinner with a friend and her young daughter, Cassidy. When Yassine saw the

outfit, he flew into one of his rages, seemingly set off by her sequined blouse. He followed her and Cassidy out into the driveway.

“You look like a whore,” Yassine screamed as she tried to unlock the car door.

Lori hated when he treated her this way. She wanted to be the kind of woman who would never allow a man to talk to her like that.

“How dare you,” she shot back. “You need to show me some respect.”

She looked up and saw Sam sitting on the porch, her long legs crossed, casually smoking a cigarette. Her sister had seen the whole thing and done nothing—even though Lori had physically stopped Robert from choking her all those years ago. When Lori tried to catch her eye as she climbed into the car, Sam looked down, as if searching in the house’s cracked porch for an excuse for her shifting loyalties.

It wasn’t the first time Sam had quietly sided with the Elhassani family and it wouldn’t be the last.

A month later, in July 2011, after Sam had moved in with Moussa, Lori and Sam had just returned from the grocery store when Yassine began picking a fight again.

“Can you bring the groceries in from the car?” she’d asked him when they first got home.

“I’ll do it when I feel like it,” he muttered, refusing to tear his eyes away from his video game. Lori knew that meant never—or at least not anytime soon—and didn’t want the food to spoil in the summer heat, so she brought the bags in herself. Yassine got angry at her for not trusting that he’d do it. He called her back into the bedroom and told her he wanted to talk to her, then picked up six-month-old Mac off the floor. Lori knew this was a sign: He only held the baby when he was about to get physical with her, because he knew she would never strike back or defend herself if Mac was in his arms. Instinctively, Lori reached out to take Mac, but she claimed Yassine shoved her onto the ground; when she tried to stand up, he pushed her again. Mac began to wail.

Maybe it was the pitch of the baby’s sobs. Maybe her anger had finally eclipsed her fear. Whatever it was, Yassine was going to pay.

Sam was smoking a cigarette out on the front porch when Lori flew through the screen door.

“Give me your phone!” she ordered Sam. “I’m calling 911.”

Sam was confused; from the outside, the fight had seemed like the same quarrels Lori and Yassine engaged in every night.

“Why are you calling the cops?” Sam asked. She lazily punched in her passcode and handed Lori the phone.

“I’m not taking it anymore,” Lori said, raising the phone to her ear. “He beat me up.”

Ten minutes later, the Elkhart police screeched to a halt outside the house on North 2nd Street, where Lori and Sam were huddled on the porch. “He shoved me,” Lori claimed, when the cops asked her what happened. She was shaking and crying now. Then the cops turned to Sam and asked her what she saw.

“I didn’t see anything,” Sam shrugged. “I was sitting out here the whole time. I just heard them yelling, and a few thuds. That’s it.”

Lori froze, her breath caught in a tiny chamber behind her throat. Sam knew how badly Yassine and Lori’s relationship had deteriorated. Now, when Lori had finally gathered the courage to speak out, Sam was acting as if everything was normal. It’s not that her sister was lying—she had been on the front porch, and she really hadn’t seen anything, at least not that time. Still, Lori felt betrayed.

That night the Elkhart police arrested Yassine and charged him with domestic battery in the physical presence of a child. He spent two nights in the Elkhart county jail before his brother Abdelillah bailed him out from California. By then, Abdelillah was the only Elhassani family member not living in or around Indiana—Moussa, Yassine, Salaheddine, Zahra, Abdelhadi, and Abdelfattah all lived in the area, while their parents Mohammad and Rkia split their time between Elkhart and Rabat. Lori wasn’t just at odds with Yassine, but with his entire family.

The morning after the fight, Lori called her mother to see if she and the kids could stay with her in Oklahoma for a while. Lisa agreed, so Lori packed up her 1993 Jeep Grand Cherokee and went to the bank to get some cash. Lori shared a bank account with Abdelillah, since he was in charge of the warehouse and the two used the account to pay for work expenses. When she went to withdraw money from the account, she realized it was empty: He had drained it entirely, leaving her with nothing. Lori called her mother back—she wouldn’t be coming to Oklahoma after all. All of her money was gone, she said. She couldn’t even afford the gas it cost to get there. When Lori came home to the house she shared with Yassine it was

empty; Yassine was still in jail, and Sam, who appeared to be taking the Elhassani family's side in the brewing war between the two families, was off with Rkia, Yassine's mother, comforting her over her son's legal troubles. Lori had her kids, but otherwise she was completely alone.

Yassine returned from jail nursing an even fiercer vendetta against his wife. He refused to leave the house his family had bought; Lori had no money and nowhere else to go, so she stayed, which Yassine allowed so he could see the kids. They fell into the same toxic patterns they always had, only this time Lori was constantly looking over her shoulder, terrified that Yassine would seek revenge. She was desperate for somewhere safe to go, even for a few days, where she could have time to figure out what to do about the kids and her collapsing life. She had no money and no connections; the only person she knew in Indiana besides the Elhassani family was Sam, and she had aligned herself with the Elhassanis. Out of fear and desperation, she decided to leave the kids with Yassine and check in for inpatient psychiatric care at Epworth Memorial Hospital in nearby South Bend. It was one of the only places she could think of where she'd truly be safe from Yassine.

In mid-July, Lori gathered a few changes of clothing and settled onto a half-deflated air mattress in a small shared room at Epworth. She couldn't bring her phone or laptop or any jewelry, including her wedding band. She couldn't even bring shoes with shoelaces, for fear the patients could use them to harm themselves. But with the hospital security and patient privacy she was safe from Yassine, at least for a little while.

From the beginning it was clear to the doctors at Epworth that Lori didn't belong there. Other patients were at the hospital for far more serious conditions. Lori's doctor at Epworth believed the anxiety and paranoia she was feeling were situational, not psychiatric; she didn't need this kind of intensive mental health treatment, she needed a safe place to live. Like so many other times in her young life—with Tony in Florida, with Peter in Washington State—Lori needed the financial support that would enable her to make healthier choices about where and how she lived and worked. A quick infusion of cash sometimes seemed to her like the only thing that would break the cycles she'd gotten into. With a little cash, she could stop depending on abusive men for housing, go to community college and get a higher paying job, and hire a good attorney who could get her a divorce from Yassine and win her sole custody of the kids. It was incredible to her

that the amount of money some people spent on a pair of shoes could fundamentally alter her life's path.

The doctor at Epworth encouraged Lori to look into staying at the YWCA, but she didn't think Yassine would let her take Mac and Cassidy with her. She missed her children desperately, and she knew that if she wanted to stay in their lives she would have to move back in with Yassine, at least until she could figure out a better plan. Leaving Lanai with her parents all those years ago had been the hardest decision she had ever made, and Lori was determined that her relationship with these children would be different.

After six days at Epworth—the average duration for an inpatient stay—Lori moved into the apartment on the west side of the house where Sam had been staying before moving in with Moussa, and Yassine stayed in their apartment on the east side. They had two separate front doors, so technically they could come and go freely without seeing each other.

But, despite Lori's hopes, that's not what happened.

Chapter Five

One night, after getting into another intense argument with Yassine over their complicated child custody situation, Lori decided to check into the Elkhart Women's Shelter with baby Mac. (Cassidy stayed with Yassine in the North 2nd Street house.) At the women's shelter, Lori and the baby settled into a bedroom shared with two other women and their children. There, at least, Lori found camaraderie—the women shared groceries, took turns doing chores, and helped care for each other's children. But Lori was still on edge; whenever she left the shelter, it seemed, she inevitably ran into an Elhassani brother. The shelter supervisor had also noticed the brothers were hanging around outside the shelter and decided to move her to a YWCA shelter in nearby South Bend, where she would be under twenty-four-hour protection. For her safety, they restricted her movement, allowing her to go out only on weekdays, when she requested it, and never on weekends.

At the YWCA Lori shared a room with a single mother who had recently been released from jail and her two young children. Many of the women there were using it as a halfway house out of prison, so the shelter had strict rules: There were mandatory group sessions and therapy, assigned chores and eating times. Prescription drug abuse, which would give way to the opioid epidemic just a few years later, was increasing in Indiana, and many of the women struggled with addiction. If your drug test came back clean, as Lori's did, you could only stay a maximum of forty-five days—after that, you'd have to leave to make space for other women in need.

Most of the other women in the shelter were also survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault. For so long Lori had felt isolated by what had happened to her—the sexual abuse she experienced as a child, the rape as a teenager, the physical violence at the hands of Yassine—but at the YWCA, she was surrounded by women who had gone through the same things. Every day Lori and the other women attended a sexual assault therapy group, where they were encouraged to discuss what had happened to them and offered advice on how to process and move on from it. It was the first time Lori felt herself really opening up about what she had been through. Saying it out loud, to a room full of women who had similar experiences, didn't fully unburden her from the weight of the trauma, but it helped

tremendously. It was in that group where Lori was able to finally put into words what the trauma caused by her family member had done to her, where she was able to recognize that losing her virginity to rape wasn't her fault, and where she finally understood all the abuse she had suffered from partners as a teenager.

By providing her with group and individual therapy, the YWCA was the first time Lori was given a space in which to discuss the sexual and physical abuse she'd endured as a child. Since the 1998 landmark CDC study identified the ten adverse childhood experiences and their physical, emotional, and mental consequences, research by experts in the field like Dr. Finkelhor had pointed to the effectiveness of "trauma-informed" approaches to help survivors heal. The trauma-informed framework uses five guiding principles when developing therapies for survivors, including safety (ensuring physical and emotional safety), choice (individual has choice and control), collaboration (making decisions with the individual and sharing power), trustworthiness (task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries), and empowerment (prioritizing empowerment and skill building).

At the YWCA's trauma-informed therapy sessions, providers emphasized compassion, nonjudgment, and active listening, always staying attuned to survivors' body language and breathing. Throughout her life, Lori had often experienced the symptoms that Drs. Finkelhor and Browne had outlined in their Traumagenic Dynamics Model, including feelings like shame, guilt, powerlessness, and betrayal. Though she only attended for about two months, the YMCA's trauma-informed group therapy helped Lori reframe what had happened to her and provided coping skills, like journaling. Lori found the group to be a revelation—she'd never discussed this stuff with anyone in a clinical setting, and she found it helped her better cope with what she had been through. Between the sexual abuse she'd endured as a child and Yassine's constant physical and emotional abuse, Lori had been feeling like she didn't have much to offer the world, or to men, besides her sexuality. The women and counselors at the YWCA encouraged Lori to embrace her many skills—her intelligence, her strong sense of right and wrong, her hardworking nature—and helped improve her self-esteem. Most importantly, they made her feel less alone. Lori, Sam, the women at the YWCA: They were all part of the same pattern playing out all across America, a country where 15 million children are exposed to

domestic violence each year—and one in nine girls are victims of childhood sexual abuse—and only a small percentage of them get help. But, though the YWCA's psychological help was invaluable, it would take a lot more than a few weeks of group therapy for Lori to live a life where her trauma no longer controlled her.

Lori often begged her sister to join her for the group therapy sessions, but Sam always refused. In fact, since Lori had moved to the shelter, Sam hadn't visited at all—she was focused on being with Moussa and keeping her job at the warehouse. But a few days before Lori's deadline to leave, Sam called her and begged her to move back in with Yassine.

"He's a totally different person," Sam promised. "He's had to take care of Cassidy by himself these past few weeks and it made him realize that he can't do it alone. He really needs you and misses you."

Lori was skeptical, but in just a few days she'd have nowhere else to go. She made the decision that so many young mothers without money or social support systems do: She decided to go back to her abusive ex. She would give Yassine one more shot.

By the time Lori moved back in with Yassine in late fall of 2011, the heady days of Sam and Moussa's whirlwind romance had started to wear off, and another side of Moussa gradually emerged. Before Moussa had met Sam, he'd briefly been married to an American woman named Amber, but they'd split up after an argument in which he hit her. Sam had no idea that this pattern would continue with her. Moussa could descend into dark moods provoked by seemingly nothing, particularly when he was drunk or high. The constant swirl of compliments and gifts he'd initially lavished on Sam eroded to reveal a more sinister side. It started with small things—lying about where he was going or who he was with, staying out all night drinking and doing cocaine—but quickly escalated into more egregious behavior, like cheating on Sam with sex workers, and verbal abuse. He barked insults at her and exerted complete financial control, with her paycheck from the shipping company going into his account, so that she was wholly dependent on him for everything from food to shelter to necessities for Michael.

Moussa constantly put Sam down, mocked her, exacerbated her already bone-deep insecurities about her lack of education or her weight. He wanted to control how she dressed and acted and thought, what she ate and where

she went. He made her dye her hair blond because he preferred blondes. Sam had always prioritized comfort over style, but Moussa insisted she dress up in tight-fitting designer clothes, treating her like his personal Barbie. He demanded to know where she was and who she was with at all times. Sam ceded these parts of her life to him instead of putting up a fight: She didn't care if he knew where she was going, she said, because she had nothing to hide. She'd always wanted a man to care this much about her.

But Moussa's obsessiveness was also scary sometimes, and went against her inherent desire for freedom and independence. She pushed back when she could—she refused to wear a GPS tracking watch he gave her, for example, and agreed instead to keep it in her purse—but to a girl whose parents had largely ignored her growing up, who sought acceptance from everyone she met, and who was raised in a religion predicated on obedience, Moussa's ferocity of attention, his need to subjugate her, felt an awful lot like true love.

Since becoming the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq in April 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his Salafist compatriots had set their sights on establishing a Caliphate that expanded beyond Iraqi territory. In 2011, around when Sam made the move to Elkhart and Lori and Yassine's marriage really started to deteriorate, al-Baghdadi dispatched an Islamic State of Iraq operative, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, to start Jabhat al-Nusra, a new militant organization in Syria. Syria, Iraq's neighbor to the west, was in the midst of a civil uprising against their longtime leader Bashar al-Assad. All across the country Syrians were taking to the streets to peacefully protest, while others began starting militias and creating uneasy alliances with rebel groups in the hopes of overthrowing the Assad regime. The chaos on the ground in Syria created the perfect power vacuum for jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra to flourish.

Al-Baghdadi wanted to establish a Caliphate that spread across Iraq and Syria, but to control large territories across the two nations, the group would have to increase its ranks. In 2012, the Islamic State in Iraq launched its year-long "Breaking the Walls" campaign, deploying vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices to stage jail breaks in eight prisons across the region, including breaching the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, where they freed more than five hundred prisoners, most of whom were being held for terrorist activities and were now free to join the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)

cause. ISI “is no longer a small cadre based around a single leader, but rather an effective reconstituted military organization operating in Iraq and Syria,” stated a 2013 Institute of War report on Middle East Security. The organization, the report continued, “has been able to grow not only because of its safe havens and recruiting grounds in Syria, but also because it has replenished its veteran manpower through prison breaks inside of Iraq.”

Despite its success in garnering territory in Iraq and Syria, al-Baghdadi knew that a truly operational Caliphate would need to recruit Muslims outside of those two countries. Whereas previous groups like al-Qaeda had relied primarily on jihadists who had been radicalized in local prisons and inspired to act by international events like the invasion of Afghanistan and the Gulf War, ISI tried to reach the widest possible audience of potential jihadis, including those in the West. To do that, the Islamic State in Iraq took a lesson from al-Qaeda’s multimedia-savvy jihadis like Anwar al-Awlaki and turned to the internet.

By 2012, nearly 3 billion people used the internet every day, so recruiters could reach potential jihadists all over the globe, including those in the US. According to a report from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London, the internet is used by extremists to create a virtual “echo chamber” that allows like-minded individuals to trade increasingly unacceptable and extremist ideas in a relatively risk-free way, creating a sense of community that isolates them from the mainstream. Graphic videos and images disseminating lies and half-truths are uploaded and shared, further galvanizing support for the cause. And joining these extremist groups—whether ISIS or the Proud Boys—only takes a couple of clicks.

The proliferation of social media apps like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter made the recruitment process especially seamless. By 2013, in the ten years since its inception, Facebook had grown to 1.23 billion monthly active users, meaning that more than a sixth of the world’s population was using the service regularly. YouTube, another major platform for extremist recruiters, also counted a billion users. The key to the explosion in growth for these businesses was their hyper-intelligent algorithms. In an attempt to keep a user engaged for as long as possible, social media algorithms identify their top interests—for jihadis, the ongoing horrors in Syria, or the importance of jihad—and send users down a rabbit hole of continuously unspooling, ever-more-fringe content. Platforms like Twitter let people

submerge themselves into virtual echo chambers, where they can be surrounded exclusively by like-minded individuals. In the early 2010s, the same conditions that eventually gave rise to the alt-right and the Trump era—viral misinformation, victimhood complexes, a warped sense of belonging—were also helping radicalize men across the globe to join the jihadist cause.

The Islamic State of Iraq recruited members to the so-called Caliphate with false promises of boundless riches, beautiful and submissive wives, and the chance to participate in violent jihad against the Western world, which had for too long treated Muslims with contempt and unfairness. A Caliphate offered a chance at true unification for Sunni Muslims who felt Islam had become too fractured by sectarian politics and ideologies and wanted to live in a society with laws dictated exclusively by the Quran.

In September 2011, just a few months after Sam moved to Elkhart and started dating Moussa, Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American imam with a devoted internet following, was killed by a CIA-led drone strike in Yemen, making him the first US citizen to be targeted and killed without due process. His death outraged activists, journalists, and legal experts, and only strengthened his legacy as one of the most well-known and oft-cited Islamic extremists. “The Hellfire missile that ended his life promoted him to martyrdom in the eyes of his fans, and his influence has turned up in terrorism case after terrorism case,” wrote *New York Times* reporter Scott Shane in 2016. “His videos, forecasting a West in which Muslims would increasingly be denigrated, marginalized and threatened with expulsion or worse, have been viewed by hundreds of thousands.” As another *New York Times Magazine* story on al-Awlaki put it, “In fact, Awlaki’s pronouncements seem to carry greater authority today than when he was living, *because* America killed him.”

Al-Awlaki’s influence informed much of the Islamic State’s doctrine and inspired an inestimable number of fighters to join the cause, including many Westerners. “Today, with the war between Muslims and the West escalating, you cannot count on the message of solidarity you may get from a civic group or a political party, or the word of support you hear from a kind neighbor or a nice co-worker,” al-Awlaki declared in one March 2010 video. “The West will eventually turn against its Muslim citizens.”

Omar Mateen, the domestic terrorist who killed forty-nine people and wounded fifty-three others in a mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in

Orlando in allegiance to ISIS in 2016, told friends that he had been listening to al-Awlaki lectures. The Tsarnaev brothers, who set off bombs at the Boston Marathon in 2013, were also known by the FBI, the media, and the general public to be followers of al-Awlaki. Major Nidal Hasan's shooting spree at Fort Hood in 2009, and the attempted Times Square car bombing in 2010 by Faisal Shahzad, were also reportedly inspired by al-Awlaki's videos. Soon, they would inspire two other recruits: Moussa and Abdelhadi Elhassani.

The first time Moussa physically assaulted Sam was in February 2012, less than a year after they met, during an argument over which items from the warehouse he should resell. Moussa shoved and punched her, and when she ran upstairs to hide with Michael, he trashed their house. It only got worse from there: Once he shoved Sam so hard she fractured a rib; another time he yanked her by her ponytail around the house, while Michael, a preschooler, watched.

Despite Moussa's violent episodes, Sam was smitten with him. He was passionate in ways both good and bad—when he loved Sam he really loved her, but when he grew angry or upset with her it was with that same passion, making her feel as if all the lights in the world had gone out. Moussa was generous with gifts, but he often used that generosity as a means of control, as if the more designer handbags he gave her, the more obligated she was to him. He bought people's happiness, including Sam's, because it was easier than actually pleasing them—easier than doing what Sam asked, like help keep the house clean, or take care of Michael. He'd take the keys to her car so she had to stay home; he'd smash her phone so she couldn't contact any friends or relatives. And when they fought, he went to extremes.

Sam had been through this before with Robert, the controlling behavior and sporadic outbursts of violence. Men with violent tendencies like Robert and Moussa were drawn to Sam for the same reason she was drawn to them; it was familiar. Somehow the cycle of anger, violence, and forgiveness, while wrenching, felt like home. All that screaming and name-calling and slapping? That was how men in Sam's community taught lessons, and how women learned them. She saw it early on with the corporal punishments she'd received from her father, Richard, whose role in her life she could not choose, and she sought it out later in her partners,

whose role she could. The darkness within Moussa had been part of what made him attractive in the first place. Besides, this was really the only kind of love she had ever known: bright-burning, mercurial, occasionally violent.

Violence is generational, passed down from grandparent to parent to child, a legacy no one wants yet few can avoid. Experiencing abuse at home as a young child—one of the CDC's ten adverse childhood experiences—is a direct predictor of involvement in violent romantic relationships later in life, whether as the victim or the perpetrator. As children, we look to the adults in our lives—our parents, our grandparents—to model healthy relationships. Instead, many people in Sam and Lori's community found themselves in toxic marriages, strained by poverty and marked by violence, unwittingly teaching their children to seek out the same. Moussa had also grown up in a patriarchal world where violence was a tool of control. It wasn't uncommon in Morocco, where Moussa was born and raised, for men to hit their wives—a national survey of women in Morocco conducted in 2019 found that 52.5 percent of married women have been victims of violence.

When Drs. Finkelhor and Browne originally developed their theories around child abuse, they saw this tendency of revictimization through the lens of "powerlessness," one of the four traumagenic dynamics they'd proposed. The feeling of powerlessness, they argued, could "impair a person's sense of efficacy and coping skills," causing an adult who suffered childhood sexual abuse to be unable to see themselves as anything but a victim. "This sense of impotence may be associated with the despair, depression, and even suicidal behavior often noted among adolescent and adult victims," the doctors wrote. "It may also be reflected in learning problems, running away, and employment difficulties, which researchers have noted in victims who feel unable to cope with their environments."

Sam was a victim: of childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, poverty, failed social support systems. The choices most women have in their lives about who to be with, where to live, and where to work were limited for Sam and women like her, whose circumstances necessitated a survivalist lifestyle. She would do whatever it took to avoid ending up in the shelter system, or back in the Witness community from which she'd been exiled—even if it meant enduring Moussa's abuse. He was her employer, her landlord, her best friend—he was everything to her. So she stayed.

After leaving the YWCA in the fall of 2011, Lori recommitted herself to trying one last time to make it work with Yassine. The therapy she'd received at the center had boosted her confidence and helped her confront the sexual and physical abuse she'd faced in her life, but she also wasn't ready yet—mentally or financially—to leave Yassine. On average, it takes survivors of domestic abuse seven attempts to leave their abusers before they leave for good. Lori was not immune to this pattern—like Sam, she returned. But by early 2012, Lori felt like she'd tried everything to make her marriage with Yassine work. She'd officially quit her job at the warehouse, but her odd jobs—covering shifts at the nearby gas station, selling her crochet projects online—paid so little she needed his financial support for their two young children, and they still shared the house on North 2nd Street, though they lived on separate sides. She'd experimented with becoming the doting wife he said he wanted, fulfilling his every desire: She served all of Yassine's meals to him at his computer while he played video games; she gave him blowjobs while he ignored her and watched porn; she took care of his mother. But Yassine remained unmoved and was disrespectful of their relationship. Before he'd tried to hide his infidelity from Lori, but now he flaunted it, even bringing girlfriends to the house masquerading as "babysitters" for their children.

One night in February 2012 after the kids had gone to sleep, Lori caught Yassine on yet another dating site. She was exhausted. She had been doing everything he asked, and still it wasn't enough. She knew well that Yassine was abusive, and that she didn't deserve to be treated this way, but she still found herself without the psychological and financial tools to leave. That night, she approached him at his computer. "What am I not doing for you?" she begged. "Please, just tell me." Yassine paused, then bowed his head and walked away. When Lori followed him into the living room, he huffed and flopped onto the couch. She lay down next to him and put her head on his shoulder; she tilted her face toward his and asked him, pleadingly, what she could do to satisfy him. It was her last-ditch attempt to repair the relationship; if she could just break through to him, coax back the Yassine she had fallen in love with in Oregon, the one who was charming and sweet and full of optimism about their life together, maybe they could work it out.

That night, something in Yassine snapped. He looked at her pale, freckled face, and sensed her desperation. Maybe that made him feel trapped. Maybe he resented her for needing him so much. And so he reacted

the way he always did in those situations—with violence. He shoved Lori to the ground. When she attempted to get up, he shoved her down again and started kicking her in the back, striking the tender place between her shoulders with his boot. Each time she got to her knees to stand he kicked her again, three, four, five, eight times. Then he grabbed Lori by the wrist and yanked her up so she was facing him. She could smell the dinner she'd cooked on his breath. "You want to call the cops on me?" he started screaming, dragging her into the kitchen. "You can call the fucking cops on me!"

Lori managed to twist her wrist out of his grip and ran up the stairs. She had her cell phone in the pocket of her hoodie, and she reached for it and dialed 911. When the operator answered she shrieked for help, but within seconds Yassine was upon her. He yanked the flip phone from her hand and broke it in half, then pushed Lori down the stairs, where she collapsed on the landing in a heap. Yassine charged down the stairs and started kicking her again, this time in her lower back. The kicks were getting weaker; Lori could tell he was getting tired. "Are you done fighting?" he screamed. Slowly she nodded and he jerked her up to face him. She crept along the edge of the wall, away from Yassine, to the other side of the living room.

Yassine sat down in a chair and Lori perched anxiously on the arm of the couch. She knew she had to get out of the house before he attacked her again, but she was afraid without some sort of distraction she wouldn't be able to make it to the front door in time. She nervously surveyed the room while Yassine caught his breath. Beside her was a wooden chair, and next to that a gallon of orange juice that had been knocked down from the counter when he'd dragged her into the kitchen. If she could throw it at him she might stun him enough to give her time to escape out the front door. Lori leapt to the floor and grabbed the juice, but when she hurled it at Yassine's head she missed; it exploded against the wall. She grabbed the wooden chair next to her and dragged it into his path, and then lunged for the door. But the brothers had installed an interior lock; in order to get out of the house you needed to have a key, and Yassine was the one who had it. As Lori frantically jiggled the knob, it slowly dawned on her: She'd have to find another way to escape.

Lori darted toward a nearby closet, which opened into another room that had a door to the outside. Maybe that one would be unlocked. But as she reached the room with the exit, Yassine recovered and came charging after

her, screaming about the orange juice. Lori scanned the room for something to protect herself and noticed a steak knife from Yassine's dinner he'd left on the dresser. (He always ate in the bedroom while playing video games.) She grabbed the knife, wheeling around and pointing it at him as he lumbered toward her, daring him to come any closer. Yassine looked at his wife, the steak knife held shakily in her hand. He rolled his eyes, turned around, and left the room.

When Lori reached the door to the outside, it was blessedly unlocked. She stumbled out onto the back lawn and saw a cab driving by. "Call 911!" she shrieked, as she sprinted toward the cab. The driver was scared—who was this crazy lady holding a knife, asking her to call 911? Lori threw the knife across the street. "Please," she begged. "Call 911." The cab driver took out her phone and dialed.

Yassine knew the police were on their way, so he yanked Cassidy out of bed and loaded her into the car before they could arrive, peeling off into the night. When the police pulled up to the house, Lori told them what had happened. They took photos of her injuries—the web of bruises forming on her back and shoulders—and of the destruction to the house. They documented her testimony and agreed to press charges. According to police records, Yassine was charged with domestic battery in the presence of a child. (Cassidy was at home that night, and therefore could have seen or heard evidence of the crime.) That charge would be added to the other charge of domestic battery in the presence of a child that had been filed against him back in July 2011, when Lori claimed he'd shoved her during the fight about the groceries. Despite countless hearings, those charges still hadn't yielded a jury trial or decision by a judge, and wouldn't for months.

Yassine didn't come back that night; the police kept watch outside of Lori's house until the morning, when her mother, Lisa, came to pick up her and Mac. Lisa had agreed to bring Lori back to their house in Oklahoma until a trial date was set for Yassine, who had taken Cassidy to stay with his mother. It wasn't safe to be in Elkhart anymore.

When Lisa arrived the next afternoon, a foot of snow covered the ground from a storm the previous week. Lori loaded her belongings into her mom's truck and took a wistful last glance at the North 2nd Street house. She had taken so much pride in that house; it was the first one that was truly "hers." She had built the wood slat fence that circled the yard so that her children and pets could have a safe place to play. She had hung the lion-

patterned curtains in the bay window that faced the street and installed a swing set in the front yard for the kids. She had envisioned such a warm family life there, the kind that she hadn't had growing up but had always wanted so badly. As Lisa maneuvered the truck away from the house and out onto the main road, Lori knew that kind of life would never happen with Yassine, inside that house or any other.

Lisa made a left on North Main Street and headed toward the highway. But just as they were about to leave Elkhart, Sam called Lisa's cell phone. Moussa had kicked her and Michael out and Sam and her son were stuck outside of the house, in the snow, without jackets or shoes.

"Please come pick us up, Mom," Sam begged from the back porch of the home she shared with Moussa, her teeth chattering. "I want to go back to Oklahoma with you and Lori."

Lisa immediately turned the truck around and headed back toward Sam's house. Lori was excited; was Sam really, finally, choosing her family over the Elhassanis?

When they arrived at Sam's house, parts of her hair were frozen and Michael's lips were grayish blue. The two looked like they'd been outside for hours. They piled into the backseat of the truck and wrapped themselves in Lori and Lisa's coats. It was dark by then, the afternoon slipping into twilight, the streetlamps flickering on. The Sally women were almost halfway to Chicago when Sam's phone rang. When she answered it, it was Moussa.

Lori couldn't hear what he was saying on the other end of the line. All she heard was Sam's voice growing softer, sweeter, and then finally her agreeing to something. When Sam hung up she poked her head between the front seats and put her hand on Lisa's shoulder. "Mom, can you drop me off at the next truck stop?" she asked. "Moussa followed us, and if you leave us at the truck stop he'll pick us up there. I want to go back to Elkhart."

Lori whipped her head around with a disgusted look on her face. "What?" she cried. "He just locked you out of the house for hours in the freezing cold. Haven't you had enough?"

Sam shook her head. "He didn't mean it," she said. "He apologized and begged us to come back. I want to go back. I don't even have any of my stuff."

Lori crossed her arms and turned her face to the window. She knew that Sam, much like herself, could be too forgiving with men, handing out

second and third chances like candy at Halloween.

As Lisa pulled into the truck stop that night, the passing headlights across the freeway made shadows on the roof of the truck. Lori shouldn't have been surprised; this was how Sam was. But she couldn't help herself: no matter how prepared she was for Sam to disappoint her, it never hurt any less.

When Lori got to Oklahoma, she got a job at Waste Management in downtown Tulsa and started a small online business designing and selling children's clothes, which she named Cassidy Lynn, after her daughter. Lisa, who was now retired, took care of Mac during the day, as well as Lanai, who by then was eight years old and viewed Lori as a sister. Lori worried constantly about Cassidy, who was back in Indiana with the Elhassani family. Every night after work, after she laid Mac down in his crib to go to sleep, she thought about Cassidy and cried. It was one thing to give up custody of Lanai—she had been so young, and so broke, and so unprepared for the incessant demands of motherhood—but it was another thing entirely to leave Cassidy, whom Lori had raised since birth, and who was staying with Yassine, whom Lori didn't trust to take proper care of her. During the two months she spent in Oklahoma, she made frequent trips back to Indiana, where the Elhassani family would let Lori see Cassidy in public locations for visitation. But the charges against Yassine and the divorce proceedings were all still up in the air, so there was no court-mandated visitation, and Lori was afraid if she tried to take Cassidy back with her to Oklahoma that would only hurt her chances of getting custody in the future.

Lori's respite in Oklahoma didn't last long; in May 2012, two months after she'd left, she received a letter from the Elkhart County Court instructing her to move back to the area to continue with the court proceedings. Elkhart police had officially charged Yassine with domestic battery in the presence of a child and issued a warrant for his arrest. Yassine was taken to Elkhart County Jail and held for a few days before being released with instructions to not leave the county. When Lori arrived back in Elkhart, she had nowhere to go; Moussa had changed the locks on the North 2nd Street house. She had the keys to the Honda Civic she and Yassine shared, but she had no idea where he'd parked it.

Lori and Mac had arrived in Elkhart before dawn, after hours on the bus from Oklahoma. She was exhausted. Because her name was still on the

lease of the shipping company's warehouse, she decided to walk there to rest before the employees started arriving for the day. She sat at her old desk with Mac strapped in his stroller beside her and dozed off. But she slept too long, and when Sam showed up for work a few hours later and found Lori asleep, she called the police and told them "some homeless person" had broken into the warehouse. Lori couldn't blame her, really—she knew that if the Elhassanis thought Sam had let her sister stay in the warehouse, she'd be fired and Moussa would beat the shit out of her. The Elhassani family already controlled everything in Sam's life, just as they did Lori's. It wasn't all that different from the oppressive Jehovah's Witness community they'd grown up in, Lori thought. The two sisters had left their religious and controlling family in search of freedom, only to end up in thrall to another. It was as if they had both been under a spell, but Lori's had started to break while Sam stayed unknowingly bound. The group therapy she'd done at the YWCA, the cops actually pressing charges against Yassine—these events had helped give Lori the courage to make real moves to disentangle herself from the relationship. But instead of recognizing the bravery it had taken her sister to leave, Sam only saw the dire consequences: homelessness, joblessness, custody problems, and more. Even though Sam was always the more adventurous sister, Lori had made a bet Sam wasn't willing to take.

That morning, the police came to the warehouse and drove Lori to the house on North 2nd Street, where they helped her get back into the half she'd been living in before taking off to Oklahoma. There was no heat or electricity, but she finally had access to all the things she'd left behind in her rush to leave. Lori began packing up her stuff and prepared to move somewhere new.

But first she had to get her daughter Cassidy back. She didn't have a car, so she loaded Mac up in the stroller and walked the three miles to the police station.

Lori was Cassidy's legal guardian, so the police agreed to help her get her daughter back; they told her that Yassine didn't have a right to custody while the domestic violence charges against him were pending. Nearly forty-eight hours later, Lori was reunited with her daughter. She had no car, no place to live, barely any money to her name. But she had both her children. At least there was that.

Lori, Mac, and Cassidy moved into a local women's shelter in the summer of 2012 to await Yassine's trial, before relocating to another shelter in Fort Wayne. Before they left, Lori decided to look one last time for the Honda Civic; she still had the keys, and if she found it, she'd finally have her own transportation. She walked by the house the night before leaving for Fort Wayne, and—like magic—it was parked right outside. The next day she loaded the kids into it and started off to the shelter. They sang "The Ants Go Marching" and "This Old Man" together all the way to Fort Wayne. With the May sun streaming in through the windshield and the kids singing at the top of their lungs in the backseat, she felt her chest starting to crack open with hope. But just as Lori was attempting her escape from the Elhassani family in earnest, Sam was getting pulled even deeper in.

Chapter Six

A year after she moved to Elkhart, on July 23, 2012, Sam married Moussa in a casual ceremony. Lori did not attend. The marriage was on impulse, really—Moussa showed up at the warehouse that afternoon to take Sam to lunch, and casually asked: “Want to get married today?” Sam, never one to turn down a fun last-minute idea, agreed. The two rushed home and changed and ran to the courthouse. A few days later, they had a ceremony at home. Beside a round mosaic table in the living room, they held hands as a justice of the peace stood between them. Sam’s hair was dyed a dark strawberry-blond and pulled back into a low ponytail; she wore a white skirt and a blue halter top with a lace scalloped neckline, the tattoo of purple puckered lips visible on her neck. Moussa stood across from her in khakis and a plaid oxford shirt and repeated after the justice of the peace as Sam gazed lovingly into his eyes:

> *I, Moussa, take you, Samantha, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward. For better or for worse; for richer or poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish until death do us part.*

Then it was Sam’s turn. She took a breath, and Moussa looked almost giddy.

> *I, Samantha, take you, Moussa, to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward. For better or for worse; for richer or poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish until death do us part.*

With that it was done: Samantha Sally, twenty-seven years old, a wounded, hardheaded Jehovah’s Witness girl, became Samantha Elhassani. For a wedding gift, Moussa bought her a Triumph motorcycle.

“The best day of my life,” Sam wrote in the caption of a YouTube video she posted in July 2012 of her and Moussa’s wedding ceremony. “And only better days to follow!” That positivity wouldn’t last much longer.

Moussa’s abuse escalated after he and Sam got married. In the fall of 2012, Sam invited AJ, one of her old neighbors from the farm in Lowell, to move to Indiana to work at the shipping company. The two had stayed in

touch over the years and Sam was excited to have someone from her childhood integrate into her new adult life. Moussa invited AJ to stay with them while he worked in the shipping company's warehouse and looked for an apartment. At first AJ thought Moussa was a nice guy, but it didn't take long for him to realize there was a darker side to the man his childhood friend had married. Moussa kicked and shoved Sam, AJ later said in a sworn testimony, and mocked her for gaining weight. Once, Sam told him, after Moussa had demanded she quit smoking, he found a pack of cigarettes in her car. Moussa flew into the house in a rage and smashed each cigarette, one at a time, on top of Sam's head.

That same fall, Sam and Moussa got into an intense fight. When she threatened to leave, he scoffed, blowing a gust of hot air and saliva through his pursed lips.

"Everything you have belongs to me," Moussa sneered. It was true: He was her husband, but he was also her landlord, her benefactor, her employer. The father figure to her son. But in that moment she was so mad it didn't matter.

"I don't care," Sam shot back, plucking her purse off the counter. "You can have everything. I don't want anything from you."

Moussa lunged toward her and grabbed her bag. "This purse is mine," he defiantly declared. Sam let him rip it from her hands. "You know what? Fine," she responded. "I'll leave without the purse."

"These clothes are mine, too," Moussa roared, pushing Sam to the floor and attempting to rip her shirt off. Michael, five years old and small for his age, stood in the corner of the room shaking as his mother screamed for help.

"Go get the scissors," Moussa screamed to Michael. "So I can finish the job." Michael refused, running out of the room and locking himself in the bathroom until Moussa calmed down.

Not long after they married, Sam found out she was pregnant with her and Moussa's first child, a baby girl. Moussa was excited to learn that he was going to be a father, but his attitude toward the mother of his child oscillated between doting and dismissive. In the winter of 2012, before the baby was born, while he drove and Sam rode in the front seat, Moussa chided her in a high-pitched voice, imitating her demands: "I want a drink.

And I want this and I want that. And I'm pregnant," Moussa whined, pointing to his belly.

He could be wonderful with Michael, and eventually with their daughter, Nadia, who was born in June 2013. Another YouTube video from when Nadia was a toddler and Michael was in elementary school shows Moussa crawling around the living room floor, pretending to be a monster—he turned his eyelids inside-out, which the kids called his "eye trick." Michael and Nadia, wearing their footie pajamas, pretended to beat the monster away, and Moussa kept crawling back at them, until eventually he made his eyes normal again, spread his arms wide, and smiled that smile that took up his whole face. "Hi!" he sang out, and the two kids tackled him with hugs.

But Moussa was unpredictable, and the tenor of their domestic lives was entirely beholden to his mood swings. If he was in a good mood, he would take Sam, Michael, and Nadia out to eat at a restaurant, or shopping at the mall, teasing and laughing all the way; if he was in a bad mood, Sam and the kids tried to make themselves scarce, to avoid provoking his wrath.

Sam would occasionally share stories of Moussa's erratic behavior with his younger sister, Zahra. When fights with Moussa escalated into violence, Zahra would invite Sam, Nadia, and Michael to stay at her house in South Bend for a few days until tensions dissipated. Sam always wanted to take her up on it, but Moussa would do whatever he could to prevent her from leaving Elkhart, including hiding her car keys, slashing her tires, or removing her car battery. He'd also refuse to let their daughter, Nadia, go anywhere with Sam, as if she were a "hostage"—Zahra's word—that he could use to control Sam; Moussa knew that as long as he had Nadia, Sam would always come back. Zahra told Sam that she loved her brother, but their marriage was poisonous and they might be better off without each other. But Sam and Moussa's disagreements were as intense and short-lived as a summer thunderstorm; just as Sam was on the brink of deciding to leave, Moussa would appear with an apology and a lavish gift, and the two would make up.

After Nadia's birth, Moussa grew even more controlling over Sam's appearance. He made her go on a diet and paid for her to get breast implants and Botox. He began insisting she do her makeup a certain way and wear expensive designer clothes. Sam had always been a jeans and T-shirts kind of girl, so she felt like an impostor in the clingy bandage dresses Moussa

bought for her. “I work in a warehouse,” she argued. “Why am I carrying a four thousand dollar purse?” But Moussa insisted. With her bleached hair and Louis Vuitton handbag, teetering precariously on four-inch heels, Sam was a living symbol of his attainment of the American dream: Less than ten years after moving, he now had a successful business, a fancy car, and a beautiful blond American wife. He had made it. Even the chemical high that Moussa got using drugs was nothing compared to the feeling of slowly amassing his empire, cobbled together with stolen goods from the warehouse and money he’d siphoned from the business account.

He still did like drugs, though, especially uppers, which Sam hated—on cocaine, he was even more manic and paranoid than usual. Once he was so high on coke he barricaded himself in the warehouse, screaming about how Sam was part of a plot against him, and she and AJ had to plead with him for hours to get him to come out. Sam tried not to pressure Moussa to get sober; every time she brought it up, he made it very clear he didn’t want to hear it. Besides, Sam herself had graduated from weed to pills. When she injured her knee in the warehouse, she’d gotten a prescription for Vicodin. Lately she’d found herself craving more and more pills to mute the soreness, so she wasn’t exactly the portrait of sobriety herself.

Despite her chronic knee issues, Sam was working long shifts as one of the managers at the warehouse and was uniquely privy to the activity going on behind the scenes, especially now that Lori was no longer working there. Sam was so valuable, in fact, that a local FBI agent approached her and asked her to serve as a paid informant, reporting on any suspicious packages that came through the warehouse, such as weapons or drugs. After clearing it with Moussa—who reasoned that it was better to have the FBI on their good side (and, possibly, that they could keep Sam from informing on anything they wouldn’t want the FBI knowing)—she agreed. Her access to the databases that logged all of the shipping company’s account holders and their shipments made her valuable. They tasked her with reporting on “any types of suspicious shipments of a criminal or national security nature,” according to a Bureau brief, including “logging details of items and their destinations, such as noting serial numbers of smartphones that were being shipped to locations in the Middle East.” To the FBI, Sam provided “valuable insight” and “important information about potential national security threats.”

Little did the FBI know that the national security threat was right under their nose. As time wore on, Moussa's avarice, violent tendencies, and struggles with substance abuse started to dovetail with a growing interest in a warped strain of Islam that bore little resemblance to the religion followed by over a billion people. Moussa had been growing closer with his younger brother Abdelhadi, who was much more serious and religious than the rest of the family. It's unclear when, exactly, it started, but by 2013 Yassine and Moussa were spending a lot of time together watching YouTube videos Abdelhadi had sent, many with extremist religious, violent, and misogynistic themes. Around the same time, they started to treat their wives differently. It was a kind of confirmation bias: Yassine and Moussa treated Lori and Sam with malice and violence, and then searched for videos that used a distorted version of Islam to encourage their misogynistic worldview; in turn, the algorithm fed them more and increasingly extreme videos in the same vein, and their relationships with the wives grew even more violent. Moussa enjoyed the promise of a lavish lifestyle for Muslims who committed jihad, but Abdelhadi was the true believer of the trio.

Before she'd moved out, Lori had occasionally witnessed the brothers watching angry-sounding YouTube videos at her house, but she wouldn't know until later who the men in the videos were. Eventually, she realized they'd been watching lectures by the Texas-born Muslim convert and imam Yusef Estes, who frequently expressed intolerant views of other religions, as well as lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki, the al Qaeda–affiliated imam who called for jihad against the West. The more time they spent together, the more Moussa and Yassine's misogynistic and violent thoughts began to mingle with Abdelhadi's extremist ones, becoming a toxic brew over which the brothers would stew.

The more time on the internet he spent, the deeper into conspiracy theories Abdelhadi fell, and he saw it as his duty to share with his family what he learned. Abdelhadi would email his brothers, sister, and parents about a variety of topics, including "Facebook ad revenue, GMOs and their danger to children, the coral reef, and watching World Cup games online," according to a government briefing later revealed in court. His brother Abdelillah, who lived in California and was the registered owner of the shipping company, said Abdelhadi was a "chronic e-mail forwarder, who frequently sent e-mails to the family regarding various topics." Among the topics about which he would email Moussa and Yassine was Salafi jihadist

propaganda—speeches or videos from al-Zarqawi, or al-Awlaki—that not only encouraged violence, but argued that it was a sacred responsibility to redeem Islam and protect it from Western interference. The Salafist doctrine that Abdelhadi had begun sharing with his brothers was also shared by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who in 2013, as the brothers began getting more into the online world of jihad, continued to capture territory for the Islamic State in Iraq. On April 11, 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq officially captured territory in Syria, and declared itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, convincing many of Jabhat al-Nusra's followers to join their ranks and establishing itself as the leading jihadist group in Syria. This was the group—ISIS, or "Daesh" in Arabic—that the world would soon become intimately familiar with.

By 2013, ISIS's propaganda had officially developed a specific brand identity, "including a focus on Syria, high quality production values, an emphasis on social media networks and an appeal to a wider, pan-Islamic and non-Arabic speaking audience," according to an analysis of ISIS propaganda conducted by the Center for Middle East Policy. In the summer of 2013, ISIS released a new multipart video series called *Windows Upon the Land of Epic Battles*, which featured interviews with jihadists on the ground in Syria. "The series generally hewed to a set formula consisting of an interview or footage of a specific topic and almost always ending with some action-oriented material, usually consisting of drive-by shootings, IEDs, suicide bombings, or combat camera coverage," according to a 2015 study on ISIS propaganda conducted by the Brookings Institution. "While the first part of the videos were almost always set in Syria, much of the action sequences took place in Iraq with sites identified as Nineveh, Kirkuk, Anbar, or Salahudin provinces."

Slickly produced and distributed over social media platforms like YouTube and Twitter, whose sensors struggled to quickly identify and block extremist content due to the sheer amount of daily uploads, Islamic State propaganda promised potential recruits generous stipends, markets overflowing with fresh produce, and the chance to fight against the *kuffar*, or nonbelievers. Women were also used as a recruiting tool, promised as *sharia*-sanctioned sex slaves to young recruits. English language media had begun reporting on the phenomenon of "sexual jihad," or "jihad al-nikah," which some, like the Tunisian government, claimed had grown increasingly popular in 2013 and 2014. In sexual jihad, women sympathetic with the

jihadist cause traveled to Syria and Iraq to provide temporary marriages and sexual favors to fighters. Their existence—and eagerness to please—was often used as a recruiting tool for jihadi wannabes from conservative areas where casual sex is forbidden.

Rape and violence toward women had long been a part of the fabric of ISIS society, but it took on a new meaning when the Islamic State began capturing young Yezidi women in Iraq in 2014. The group considered Yezidis (also spelled Yazidi), a minority religion observed mostly by those in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, to be *kafir*, and therefore justified killing, raping, and enslaving them. Al-Baghdadi himself was a known serial rapist, having repeatedly raped the American aid worker Kayla Mueller along with countless others. That attitude trickled down to even the most junior of ISIS fighters, as the whole group used cherrypicked Quranic teachings and religious rulings to "not only justify violence, but also to elevate and celebrate each sexual assault as spiritually beneficial, even virtuous," wrote *New York Times* reporter Rukmini Callimachi.

But the existence of sex slaves, and the promise of violent acts on the battlefield, only works as a recruiting tool on the kind of person who has an appetite for both. When she first started dating Moussa, Sam couldn't have known that the same thirst for power and control that animated Moussa's violent behavior toward her would also, ultimately, contribute to his desire to pledge his life to the Islamic State. The extremist organization he eventually joined had long used fear and violence to exert power and control, not unlike the way Moussa treated Sam at home. Many of ISIS's most notorious killers began by abusing women, like the Manchester Arena bomber Salman Abedi, who killed twenty-two people and wounded more than a thousand in an ISIS-affiliated attack in 2017—a few years after he punched a female fellow student in the head because he thought her skirt was too short.

The Islamic State is not unique in this phenomenon. A number of studies have shown a direct link between both domestic and international terrorism and misogyny. Many of the worst mass killers and terrorists of the last century had troubling histories of violence against women: Elliot Rodger, the twenty-two-year-old "involuntary celibate" who went on a killing spree in Isla Vista, California, in 2014, cited his immense hatred for women as his motivation for the attack. ("There is no creature more evil and depraved than the human female," Rodger wrote in his notorious 141-

page manifesto.) Dylann Roof, the white supremacist who killed nine people in Charleston, South Carolina, in a racism-fueled domestic terrorist attack, cited a form of patriarchal control over women as partial motivation for the shooting. (A witness reported Roof said, “You rape our women and you’re taking over our country” as he opened fire on a Bible study group at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, all of whom were Black.) The list goes on: The Orlando, Florida, shooter Omar Mateen had a history of abusing his own wife; Connor Betts, who killed nine people, including his own sister, in Dayton, Ohio, in 2019, had been suspended from school for circulating a list of girls he wanted to rape. Mass shootings, a form of terrorism that occurs frequently in the US, are committed overwhelmingly by men with histories of gender-based violence: One 2019 analysis by *Mother Jones* found that more than a third of the perpetrators of mass shootings since 2011 had a documented history of violence against women.

As Nazir Afzal, a British solicitor and gender-based violence expert told Joan Smith in *Home Grown: How Domestic Violence Turns Men Into Terrorists*, “The first victim of an extremist or terrorist is the woman in his own home.”

Not all men who commit domestic abuse become terrorists; most do not. And not all women who are abused find themselves in places as extreme as a war zone. When Moussa starting violently abusing Sam and controlling how she dressed and where she went, he had not yet made plans to join the Islamic State. But the violence, the susceptibility to extremist thinking, were already there. And Sam didn’t see it—or refused to see it—until it was too late.

In the summer of 2013, shortly after Nadia was born, Lori received a phone call from her sister. Lori’s divorce from Yassine had been finalized six months earlier, and the two had spoken on and off since then, but kept each other at arm’s length.

“They subpoenaed me to testify on behalf of Yassine,” Sam told Lori quietly. Yassine’s court date had finally been set for that September.

Sam had been there the night of the grocery store fight, and now Yassine’s lawyers wanted her to testify in court to what she’d witnessed. Two years had passed since Sam watched from the North 2nd Street front porch as Lori called 911 to report Yassine from Sam’s phone. So much had

happened since then—Sam had barely even known Moussa. Now she was married to him, had a daughter with him; she had a life outside of her sister that she had to protect.

“We’re sisters and I don’t want this to ruin our relationship,” Sam continued. “But I have to do it.”

Lori felt deflated. She didn’t trust her sister to speak honestly, but she couldn’t exactly tell her to dodge a subpoena.

She sighed. “It’s okay,” Lori said. “If you go up there and you tell the truth, then we’re fine.”

On September 25, 2013, the Sally sisters, along with Yassine, Moussa, and their mother, Rkia, gathered at the Elkhart Superior Court to witness the proceedings of the domestic abuse case against Yassine. As a witness for the prosecution, Lori was placed in a secluded room, unable to listen to Sam’s testimony, which was recorded by a court reporter.

When it was Sam’s turn to testify, she settled anxiously into the witness box. Yassine’s lawyer, Thomas Leatherman, bespectacled and with a swoop of gray hair, approached the stand. After establishing biographical details, he turned to a more intense line of questioning.

“Do you know whether or not Lori has any kind of an issue with her health that could lead to bruising?” he asked, according to a transcript of the hearing.

“Yeah. Absolutely,” Sam replied. “Me and my sister, both, are very fair skinned and anemic, which is, basically, just an iron deficiency, and it causes bruising easily.”

“Do you see bruises on her from time to time?”

“Absolutely.”

“All of her life?”

“Yeah. Oh yeah.”

“I want to direct your attention to July 14, 2011,” Leatherman continued. “Do you remember that day?”

“Yes, I do,” Sam replied.

She told him that she and Michael had had dinner with Lori, Yassine, Nadia, and Mac, as she so often did on weekdays after work.

“Now, on July the 14, 2011, were you consuming alcoholic beverages?” Leatherman asked.

“Yes, sir,” Sam responded. “We, typically, would have a glass of wine for supper.” Lori had sworn she didn’t drink that night, but now Sam was telling the court she had.

“After dinner, it was about thirty minutes after supper, we would go to the grocery store to, you know, kind of replenish what we had used for supper that evening and so we went to the grocery store,” Sam continued. “It was myself, Lori, and their young son. We went to Kroger’s, the closest grocery store.”

Afterward, she testified, “I brought my groceries into the house, and then because I didn’t want to smoke in the car with the baby I just left my groceries in and then I came out on the porch and had a cigarette.”

That’s when she heard the fight, Sam said: “It was loud screaming, aggressive, coming, obviously, from a woman… from my sister Lori.”

“How long did this screaming go on?” Leatherman asked.

“It wasn’t long, maybe two minutes. Then she walked outside and asked me to use my cell phone. She seemed mad but I didn’t see—you know, I just thought it was just an argument. The way, you know, husbands and wives argue at times.”

“All right,” Leatherman continued. “Was she crying?”

“No.”

“Was she hysterical?”

“No.”

“So did you give her your phone?”

“Yes. She called the police.”

“Now, was her demeanor talking to the person on the phone different than the demeanor when she came out of the house?” Leatherman asked.

“Yes, it was. I had no idea there was even anything wrong until she was on the phone and then she’s hysterical. She’s crying and she’s upset.”

“And what was her demeanor after she got off the phone before the law enforcement officers arrived?”

“Once she hung up the phone she was back the way I saw her when she walked outside and asked me for my phone. She was calm and, I mean, she seemed mad but she wasn’t in tears.”

Then Yassine’s lawyer went in for the kill: “Do you have an opinion about the truthfulness of your sister?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What’s your opinion?”

“That she’s not truthful, in general.”

Leatherman took a seat, seemingly satisfied, and then it was the prosecution’s turn to question Sam. Patrick Dowd, the deputy prosecuting attorney in the case, asked her to clarify some of her statements about the incident before he turned his focus to Sam’s own truthfulness.

“You had a conversation this last week about this upcoming trial with your sister, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And it’s your belief, in fact, that if Mr. Elhassani is convicted that the business that you work for is going to be shut down. Isn’t that right?”

That’s what Lori thought it was really about: Sam was protecting what she had built. The Elhassani family controlled Sam’s entire life: where she lived, where she worked, how much money she made, how much time she got to spend with her children. Would she really give all that up, just for her sister?

“No,” Sam responded. “That’s not correct.”

“Is it your testimony then that you don’t believe the business will be shut down if Mr. Elhassani is convicted?” Dowd asked.

“That’s correct.”

“And, in fact, didn’t you say that to your sister last week when you were on the phone, that you believed that the family was going to close down the business and move it out of state if Mr. Elhassani is convicted?” he continued.

Sam shifted in the stand. “I had mentioned that we needed to put all of this behind us because my mother is visiting this weekend. That’s all we spoke about… about today and how it was going to affect my mother’s visit.”

“Ms. Elhassani, you, also, believe that if Mr. Elhassani is convicted that it could potentially ruin his life here in the United States. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, I do believe that,” Sam replied.

“Isn’t it true that you believe that Mr. Elhassani might be deported if he’s convicted?”

It was a legitimate fear: The previous year, in 2012, ICE had reported more than 400,000 deportations, a record number. “Yes,” Sam confirmed.

“Ms. Elhassani, you used to be married to somebody else,” Dowd asked, leading Sam toward another line of questioning. “Isn’t that right?”

“That’s correct.”

“In fact, you experienced some sort of domestic violence from your first husband. Did you not? In fact, he put you in the hospital in Evansville. Did he not?”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Sam’s eyes flicked up to the ceiling, as if she was remembering something: Robert, pinning her to the ground of the trailer with his sharp knee on her chest, the crackling sound of the bones and ligaments in her neck beneath his thumbs, the blood smeared all over the car that night at the gas station.

Dowd wanted to prove that Sam’s acclimation to her own abuse kept her from seeing what Yassine did to Lori as wrong. “And isn’t it true,” Dowd asked, “that you don’t believe that whatever your sister is going through is really comparable to what you suffered at the hands of your ex-husband?”

“That’s correct,” Sam replied, her voice charged with defiance.

Yassine was found not guilty.

Yassine’s trial was the final betrayal in a series of escalating conflicts that pried the sisters apart, almost for good. Both Sally sisters felt wronged—Lori believed Sam had lied in court, and Sam believed she’d told the truth. They had experienced the same event but had left it with entirely different interpretations. To make matters worse for Sam, her parents believed that she had lied, and that she should’ve done more to protect her younger sister. Because of the trial, Yassine had been spared jail, and now he and Lori were embroiled in an ugly battle for custody of Cassidy and Mac. Sam believed none of that was her fault; Lori believed all of it was.

“I cut people off with no hesitation, no explanation, and no warning,” Sam wrote on Facebook not long after the trial. “Your friendship card will be revoked if you do some phony stuff or I feel you can’t be trusted. Life is too short and I’m getting too old to be dealing with people who haven’t grasped the concept of LOYALTY.”

Lori struggled financially and emotionally after Yassine was found not guilty in the domestic abuse case. She was barely getting by with her job at a gas station convenience store, one of several local markets in the area owned by her friend Sukha and his family. In addition to opening the gas station every day at 4 a.m., Lori helped with the stores’ paperwork and order fulfillment. Sukha was kind to her, and though he couldn’t afford to pay her, he let her fill her truck with gas for free, and a friend of his

provided Lori and her kids a free place to stay. Lori used government assistance to pay for groceries and other necessities.

Lori had been close with Sukha's nephew Pawan and his father, Jagtar, who ran the nearby Saleh's Market. The market took up the ground floor of a two-story residential building made of light blue clapboard siding and catered to the neighborhood around it, comprised primarily of Black and brown families living below the poverty line. A sign above the dilapidated awning advertised its wares: "Money Orders. Utility Payments. Food Stamps. Lottery. Beer & Wine." But just a few weeks before Yassine was found not guilty, Pawan and Jaguar had been killed in a robbery, and Lori was badly shaken by the murders. Between Sam's gang fight and her abusive relationship with Yassine, Lori had become intimately acquainted with violence—in her life, it seemed as inevitable as a summer thunderstorm—but not with death. She had come to see Sukha and his family as an extension of her own, and she worked hard keeping their small Elkhart network of mini-marts functioning. She and Sukha ran the gas station, their friends Nader and Manga ran the store on Main Street, and Pawan and Jagtar had run the Middlebury Street market. Now she had lost two close friends to gunfire at one of the very markets where she worked; in fact, she realized, it very well could've been her working at Saleh's the night the gunman came. The idea that Lori could've randomly been plucked from her life, leaving her kids motherless with a father like Yassine, terrified her. At night she would fall asleep easily, exhausted from the extra shifts she'd have to pick up at the markets to cover Pawan and Jagtar's work, but wake up terrified by nightmares that someone had kidnapped her kids.

At least Lori's love life was looking up. She had started seeing a new man she met online, a Pakistan-born truck driver named Hariss. She was in no way ready for another full-blown relationship, so they kept things casual. The first day the two met in late 2013, they took Cassidy and Mac to the Chuck E. Cheese in nearby Mishawaka and sat and talked while the kids played on the indoor jungle gym. They saw each other only a couple of times a year, when Hariss's trucking route brought him around. When he came to Indiana, they were together; when he was on the road, they weren't, which was fine with Lori.

Hariss, who was also Muslim, helped Lori see a side of Islam that she'd been unable to understand with Yassine. Islam promotes similar daily

practices as other monotheistic religions, such as having good moral character, donating to charity, and the importance of prayer. Through Hariss, Lori began to realize that her understanding of Islam had been corrupted by both the Western media's often Islamophobic portrayals of the religion and her experiences with Yassine, who had improperly used his faith to justify his abusive and controlling behavior. The true version of Islam—the one practiced by billions of people globally—was about love, faith, and never doing harm to others, and took no issue with Christians or those of other religions. As the Prophet Muhammad described in the Quran, "Blessed is he who earns his living through lawful ways and he whose inward status is good, outward is decent; spends his surplus wealth in charity; abstains from excessive talking; people remain safe of (any) evil from him; he treats others with justice."

While with Hariss, Lori started occasionally wearing a *hijab*—Facebook photos taken at the gas station show Lori posing in a Lebanese-styled *hijab* at the gas station counter, backgrounded by packages of cigarettes—but eventually stopped after one too many Elkhart locals told her to "go back to where she came from."

It was late 2013, and ISIS was on its way to becoming a household name in the US. That April, the Tsarnaev brothers had set off a series of bombs at the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring 264 and instigating a four-day manhunt. Since those attacks, hate crimes and violent rhetoric against Muslims had increased. On TV, Fox News contributor Erik Rush declared that Muslims were "evil," adding, "Let's kill them all." A report from the Southern Poverty Law Center found that anti-Muslim bias attacks "have been rising slowly but steadily since 2012."

This is how terrorism works, by design. A terrorist attack is meant to provoke just that—terror—which causes people to act irrationally, out of fear and hatred and ignorance.

"The resulting Islamophobia does the work of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State for them," wrote Scott Shane in the *New York Times*. "Rather than draw the circle of opprobrium around a tiny number of violent fanatics, some worried Westerners draw it around the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. Yet if all Muslims are smeared as potential enemies, some become more susceptible to the siren call of Mr. Awlaki and his fellow recruiters."

Chapter Seven

Lori and Sam hadn't spoken at all since Yassine's domestic abuse trial. Every time Sam would think to reach out to her sister, she'd be triggered by the same anger and stubbornness that started the whole thing and eventually decide it wasn't worth it. But Elkhart wasn't a large city, and they couldn't avoid each other forever. One day in early 2014, Sam and her friend Cassie decided they wanted to get new tattoos. Cassie was heavyset with brown hair cut short, a lip ring, and the word "Music" tattooed below her collarbone. She was known for her acerbic wit, which was perfect for Sam, whose family liked to joke that she wasn't prejudiced—"she just hates everyone equally." Once, when the two friends were driving back from the beach, Cassie told Sam that she'd never gone over a hundred miles an hour in a car. "We're going to change that," Sam replied, and accelerated the car until it hit 120 mph, the two women giggling maniacally as they zoomed down the freeway. Sam had a daredevil side, but Cassie always felt like even if something went wrong, Sam could fix it.

The two women headed to Juicy Tattoo, a tattoo and piercing parlor in the same shopping center as Sam's favorite pawn shop, Gold & Diamonds Jewelry and Pawn. Sam parked the white BMW convertible Moussa had recently bought her—top up, because it was midwinter—in the parking lot, and the two girls went into the shop. After the artist finished Sam's tattoo—Moussa's last name, Elhassani, in Arabic on her wrist—she was in the lobby preparing to pay when the bell on the front door jingled. She turned around to see who was coming into the shop. Sam froze. It was her sister, Lori: She'd recognized Sam's car in the parking lot, with its "SAMMY1" license plate. The two sisters hadn't talked in months, but now Lori approached Sam, arms outstretched for a hug.

"Oh my god, I've missed you so much," Lori exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Sam. "Where have you been? What have you been doing? Are you okay?"

Sam went rigid. It all seemed so disingenuous, her sister's delighted reaction to their happenstance meeting, like she was trying to smooth over with stilted friendliness the guilt she felt about their falling out. She had Moussa, and her friends from the warehouse, and the whole Elhassani family. Sam didn't need Lori anymore.

Sam wiggled out of Lori's embrace and looked her sister in the eye. "Don't touch me," she snapped, and turned back to hand the cashier what she owed. Then Sam spun around and walked out of the store, with Lori trailing behind her.

"What's wrong?" Lori asked, her voice quivering.

Sam shook her head and looked Lori straight in the eye. "Stop looking for me. If you ever talk to me, or if you ever touch me again, I'll file a restraining order against you." Lori stood there, shoulders slumped. She didn't say a word. Sam and Cassie stormed past her, unlocked the BMW, and climbed in. As Sam navigated out of the parking lot, she watched Lori in the rearview mirror, standing alone and dejected on the sidewalk.

Estranged from her sister, albeit by choice, and wounded by her parents' decision to take Lori's side, Sam grew even closer to the Elhassani family. Moussa and his brothers were all she had in Indiana, and she turned toward them, forever chasing acceptance. She also vowed to stick by Moussa's side, despite any obstacle. "Most women want a man that's already established," Sam wrote on Facebook in March 2014. "A strong woman will be a part of his struggle, survive it, succeed together, and build an empire."

That spring, Moussa's brother Abdelhadi and his wife, Linda, came from Minnesota to stay with them for a few months. Sam knew that Abdelhadi was religious, but she didn't know he was a part of the online jihadist community, or that he was getting Moussa interested in it as well. Moussa had always been less observant than his brothers and had never asked Sam to convert from Christianity to Islam. She knew that his family back home in Morocco was much more conservative and politically active, but that was the extent to which she was aware of Moussa and Abdelhadi's relationship to Islam. Sam was a Jehovah's Witness girl from Oklahoma with a tenth grade education. She didn't speak Arabic, could not fathom the geopolitical complexities of the Middle East, and, until Moussa, she had never met a Muslim person before. But she was also smart and good at reading people; she could manipulate Moussa just as easily as he could manipulate her. Later, Sam would claim she knew nothing about the depths of Moussa's radicalization until he dragged her to Syria; Lori would argue otherwise.

When Abdelhadi and Linda came to stay with them in the spring of 2014, Sam was tasked with being Linda's "babysitter," going with her to the

bank and the grocery store and the park while their husbands hung out at home, playing video games and watching YouTube videos in Arabic. Sam also spent a lot of time with Moussa's sister, Zahra; they'd smoke cigarettes together on the edge of High Dive Pond or go drag racing through the backstreets of Elkhart. Sam's knee injury still bothered her, and she continued self-medicating with Vicodin and alcohol and tried to keep off her knee as much as possible.

At the shipping company's office, Sam grew closer with her female workers, including Angela, the woman who'd raised complaints about allegedly illegal shipments to Yassine back when Lori was still working there. By then Angie had been at the shipping company for a couple of years, and Sam often confided in her about Moussa's abuse. She told Angie that he beat both her and Michael and that she was scared of him. Angie thought Moussa wanted someone to control and that he'd found her in Sam. When Angie had first met Sam, she was outgoing and spirited, but she felt Sam hadn't been the same since her marriage.

One day, after a particularly violent night with Moussa, Sam came into the warehouse in tears, unable to control the terror that welled up inside her after another one of Moussa's coke-fueled rages. When Angie saw she was crying, she asked what was wrong.

"He told me last night that if I ever tried to leave, he would kill me," Sam admitted. "I'm scared to death."

Angie put her hand on Sam's hand, and the weight and the warmth of that gesture felt comforting.

"There are places you can go," Angie said. "People who can help you. You don't have to stay with him."

Sam shook her head. "He'll kill us," she just kept saying. "He'll kill us."

By then it was the summer of 2014, and with the brutal heat came the creeping sense that the human capacity for cruelty had reached its tipping point. As panic over the Ebola epidemic spread globally, a new religious extremist group punctured the consciousness of the American public. After officially becoming the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2013, ISIS had overtaken the northeastern Syrian city of Raqqa in January 2014 and declared that Raqqa was now the capital of the Islamic State. By February, al-Qaeda had publicly disavowed al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State.

As sectarian strife raged between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq, the group's extreme Salifist ideology was gaining an increasing number of followers. The group's promises to kill or convert all non-Muslims in its quest to build a worldwide Caliphate was a terrifying one to Westerners already primed to draw racist and Islamaphobic comparisons between Muslims and terrorists. By June 2014, ISIS had already captured large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq, including the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit. On June 29, the group officially announced the creation of its Caliphate, a Kingdom for Muslims governed by *sharia* law. The leader, its Caliph, was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had been the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq since its inception in 2006.

In August 2014, when US air strikes against ISIS began and the group released a clip of a masked fighter defiantly beheading the American freelance journalist James Foley, this shadowy organization that had been perpetrating rape and murder and torture halfway across the globe felt suddenly very close to home to many Americans—Americans who feared that ISIS signaled the death of Western secular civilization, but also, perhaps, Americans like Sam and her Moroccan-born, US-based husband, Moussa, who were searching for an opportunity to start over. To Sam, whenever she first became aware of ISIS, the group's millenarianism may not have seemed that different from the Jehovah's Witness teachings of her youth: At their core, both were doomsday groups that encouraged an obsessive focus on a utopian afterlife and a chronic detachment from this plane of existence.

It was that same summer, the summer of ISIS, when Abdelhadi started showing Moussa more and more propaganda videos. Yassine had met a new woman named Rachel and was spending all his time with her instead of with his brothers, but Moussa and Abdelhadi would hole up in the living room of Moussa's house and watch hours of extremist lectures and footage of the war in Syria. Sam found it irritating, how much time her husband was spending with his brother instead of with her and the kids; she also resented Moussa's expectation that she would continue to babysit Linda while the brothers hung out.

Moussa was still taken by the promise of a lavish lifestyle for those who moved to Syria to commit jihad, while Abdelhadi, the real fanatic, genuinely believed in the cause, and continued to send his family extremist religious propaganda. In fact, Abdelhadi was such a prolific email

forwarder—particularly of conspiracy theories and extremist content—that his brother Abdelillah, who was still living in California with his American wife and three kids, eventually set up a filter on his emails that sent them directly to the spam folder.

Even if some of the Elhassani brothers were wary of Abdelhadi's interest in jihad, Abdelhadi and Moussa continued to watch ISIS's increasingly high-budget videos. Almost immediately after the Caliphate's creation was declared by al-Baghdadi in June 2014, ISIS created a multilingual media organization called the al-Hayat Media Center, which produced high-quality multimedia propaganda that it spread on networks like Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Telegraph, and WhatsApp. The media was better-produced and more easily available than the al-Zarqawi and al-Awlaki lectures that the jihadists of the mid-aughts had traded. The group skirted censors by publishing propaganda to the deep web, where it was de-indexed and unsearchable but could easily be downloaded and shared by others on social media. Videos like *Clanging of the Swords 4* aimed to showcase the group's military prowess, while others like *There Is No Life Without Jihad* featured British and Australian fighters calling for their Western compatriots to come join the fight. The videos were slickly produced and featured Hollywood-style special effects, and their brutality attracted international media attention, which ISIS considered free publicity for its ideology.

Without knowing it, Moussa and Abdelhadi were being swept up in a wave of radicalization playing out across the globe. A year from then, in May 2015, the UN Security Council would estimate that "more than 25,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries have joined ISIS and other jihadist groups in Syria," according to a report by the George Washington University Program on Extremism. That same year, the US would become aware of more than two hundred fifty Americans who had traveled to or attempted to travel to Syria, and three hundred "American and/or US-based ISIS sympathizers active on social media, spreading propaganda, and interacting with like-minded individuals." And those were just the ones actively posting; during the time Moussa and Abdelhadi started sharing more ISIS videos, they were some of the estimated "several thousand" people based in America consuming ISIS propaganda online every day. Though extremist groups had been using the internet and social media to spread their messages for years, "No matter the format, [ISIS's] message of

radicalization spreads faster than we imagined just a few years ago," then FBI Director James Comey testified before the US Senate in July 2015. "Social media has allowed groups, such as ISIL, to use the internet to spot and assess potential recruits. With the widespread horizontal distribution of social media, terrorists can identify vulnerable individuals of all ages in the United States—spot, assess, recruit, and radicalize—either to travel or to conduct a homeland attack. The foreign terrorist now has direct access into the United States like never before."

No matter the extremist ideology—Islamic fundamentalism, white nationalism, violent misogyny—the content used in online radicalization often shares common themes, preying on people's need for duty and purpose, stoking their sense of victimhood, and offering a reward for their allegiance. The ISIS propaganda that Moussa and Abdelhadi watched contained all of these messages: It was their duty, as good Muslims, to save the Syrian people from the evils that Bashar al-Assad had wreaked on them; they should leave the US for the Caliphate because they didn't belong in a Western country, where the government discriminated against them; once they made the difficult trip to Syria, they would be rewarded with mansions, gold, beautiful women—everything they could possibly want.

The US government's definition of the radicalization process includes four distinct stages: pre-radicalization, when a person begins to seek out extremist material, often because of life difficulties; identification, in which a person becomes a full-scale believer and begins to isolate him or herself from those who do not believe; indoctrination, when a person makes moves indicating he's ready to act on behalf of his beliefs, such as attending a terrorist training camp or preparing financing for a group; and action, in which a person knowingly commits an act of terror on behalf of the group. Moussa was entering the identification stage: The more ISIS videos he watched, the more he saw a life for himself in the Caliphate, and the closer he drew to Abdelhadi and away from the rest of his family. Lori's ex-husband Yassine, who watched the videos but later told a BBC journalist he didn't agree with them, knew that the two were nurturing an interest in jihad, but "didn't think anything of it." He assumed it was a passing phase, and that the two would never actually act on it.

No one descends into extremism for a singular reason: For Moussa, factors that contributed to his radicalization likely included his struggles with untreated mood disorders and substance abuse, the influence of his

already radicalized younger brother, an increasing sense of alienation from the American life he had established for himself, and an unquenchable desire for more. Even as Moussa watched ISIS's propaganda with Abdelhadi, he didn't become more religious or observant; he didn't make Sam dress conservatively or start praying five times a day. He was an extremist in the purest sense of the word: Everything he did, he did to the extreme. He shared Sam's appetite for danger and was constantly looking for his next source of stimulation, whether it was through drugs or sex or violence. And he had that insatiable greed. Moussa's quest for more was almost a compulsion, and it was a compulsion that Islamic extremist groups preyed on with empty promises of immense wealth. Men interested in joining ISIS were promised gold, power, and, of course, a place in heaven. They could live in the opulent homes rich Syrians had abandoned and amass wealth and influence, a promise that was compelling to a man living a modest life in a midwestern town. The radical religious doctrine was simply part of the agreement.

As his interest in moving to Syria grew, Moussa also began using drugs more regularly, and cheating on Sam with sex workers without even trying to hide it. At one point, things got so bad that Sam printed a giant sign that read, "My husband would rather do cocaine and sleep with prostitutes than be with his family," and planted it in the front yard for all their neighbors to see. Even Moussa's family was worried for him—he had changed so much over his past two years in Elkhart, from a troubled thrill-seeker to something much more menacing. He seemed unbalanced, his moods entirely out of his control. Sometimes, when they fought, Sam would think that she barely recognized him. Something had to change.

Lori and Sam were estranged, but their lives continued in parallel. In the spring of 2014, Yassine pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of domestic battery, stemming from the 2012 incident in which Lori had flagged down the cab and had the driver call 911. Lori felt a small sense of relief that Yassine had admitted in court to what he'd done to her, but was horrified that he'd only been sentenced to probation, and was disgusted by the Elkhart judicial system. To really get away from Yassine and Elkhart, she knew she'd have to become more financially stable. Lori knew that the more money she had, the better life she could give her kids, and the more power she would have when it came to legal issues like custody. Her time at the

YWCA had emphasized real-world skills Lori's parents had never taught her—like budgeting—and she was eager to apply those skills to give her and her kids a better life. She was also feeling more emotionally stable than she had in years, with Yassine officially in the rearview mirror.

In mid-2014, Sam's ex-boyfriend Raf reached out to her on Facebook Messenger because he was missing Sam and said that he wanted some closure on the relationship. He and Lori met for coffee and quickly struck up a friendship, texting each other memes and jokes, occasionally going bowling or taking the kids to dinner. Raf had quit the trucking industry and was working as a telecom technician in Tulsa. He told Lori that all you needed to become a licensed journeyman electrician was four years of apprenticeship, followed by an exam. It wasn't exactly the career Lori had envisioned for herself, but when Raf offered to let her be his apprentice, she accepted. Journeymen electricians earned an average of $55,000 a year in Indiana, which was much better than what she was making at the gas station—Sukha had started paying her, in addition to providing free rent and gas, but not much. And if she kept at it, she could eventually earn enough work experience to become a master electrician, where the average salary was $75,000. This could be her chance, after so many years of living below the poverty line, to finally build a more financially stable life for herself. She began shadowing Raf on his electrician calls around the Midwest, learning the ins and outs of how to install and maintain electrical systems in schools, condos, and businesses.

Though her divorce from Yassine was finalized in late 2014, Moussa continued to hector Lori when he saw her in Elkhart. He resented her for bringing the domestic abuse case against Yassine and tried everything he could to make life difficult for her. In the fall of 2014, she decided she'd had enough. It wasn't safe to live in Indiana anymore.

But if Lori was going to move far enough away from Moussa and Yassine to feel safe, she'd have to temporarily go without her kids while the court worked out a new custody arrangement. She decided that sacrifice was worth it. While Sam's need for approval kept her enmeshed in the Elhassani family, Lori didn't feel like she needed the validation of others to craft her sense of self. As long as she had her dogs, a job, and a roof over her head, she'd be okay.

In early 2015, Lori put down a security deposit on a two-bedroom apartment in the Winchester Place Apartment complex in Houston, Texas. It

was small but clean, in a safe, leafy neighborhood northwest of the city. Her apartment was outfitted with large windows and brand-new appliances, and the complex boasted a shared swimming pool and a jogging trail where she could walk her dogs. Lori continued traveling around the Ozarks and Texas on electrician calls, collecting her apprenticeship hours. The plan was to build a life in Houston and eventually file for sole custody to move the kids with her to Texas. In the meantime, she'd fly up to Elkhart as often as she could afford to spend time with her kids; for now, she'd have to settle for calling them every night.

For the first time in her life, Lori was beginning to have the luxury of planning ahead. She'd grown up in a religion where the present was just a temporary way station to an eternal afterlife, actively discouraged from doing anything that could be considered investing in the future, like getting an education, building a career, or saving money. As an adult, every day was a new struggle for survival, working long shifts in restaurants in Florida and at gas stations in Indiana, trying to cobble together enough money for the most basic necessities. She'd had a slight reprieve when she was pregnant in Oregon and Yassine was working for his brother, but that hadn't lasted long. For most of her life Lori had worked long hours for minimum wage, eating ramen and Taco Bell for dinner, forgoing heat in the winter and air-conditioning in the summer. It was exhausting enough that she could barely plan the next week, let alone the next five years. Now, fully independent from both her family and Yassine and Moussa, she had a clear career goal in mind—becoming a journeyman—and was saving money so that, once the custody agreement with Yassine was worked out, she could buy a safe place for her and her kids to live. She was starting to see a future for herself, but she was heartbroken that it seemed that future would not include her older sister.

By the summer of 2014, Lori hadn't seen Sam since their run-in at Juicy Tattoo six months earlier, when Sam had told her she'd file a restraining order if Lori ever tried to contact her again. Sometimes Lori still tried to get in touch through Facebook messages or emails, but they all went unanswered. Her only way to keep tabs on Sam—who barely even talked to their parents—was by checking her frequently updated Facebook page, which was littered with memes, inspirational quotes, and the occasional tidbit of revealing information. When Sam's daughter, Nadia, contracted pneumonia in March 2014, Lori found out only through Sam's Facebook

account that Nadia had to stay in the hospital overnight until her fever dropped.

Lori still spoke with one friend who occasionally hung out with Moussa and Sam, the South Bend grocer named Nader who worked with Sukha. In August 2014, after she'd settled in Houston and gotten contract work with Comcast, she messaged Nader to see if he'd heard anything about Sam, who was posting less on Facebook. Nader told her that Moussa had come into the Main Street Mini Mart recently and asked if he wanted to purchase any of the vehicles he and Sam owned, including Moussa's souped-up Ducati motorcycle and the Subaru that he'd bought for Sam less than a year earlier. Moussa told Nader they needed cash, but didn't say why; later, Nader heard Moussa and Sam were also trying to sell their house in Elkhart.

"I think they're running from something," Nader told Lori, which made sense to her. Sam used to complain about Moussa's bad habit of ripping off drug dealers, which made them a target. Maybe that was it.

That fall, Nader called Lori and said he'd heard that Sam and Moussa were moving down to Texas, but then their trail went cold.

It was Thanksgiving weekend 2014 when, Sam later told the government, Moussa sat her down in the living room of the house on North 2nd Street and announced he had something to tell her. She perched on the arm of their sofa, feeling slightly alarmed. Moussa was always so casual, so she knew right away it was something important. He wouldn't drum up all this drama otherwise.

According to the diary Sam later kept, Moussa looked at her solemnly and said, "I want to go fight in the cause of Islam." Then he launched into an impassioned monologue about the Islamic State's war in Syria. According to Sam, he said he wanted to fight for the righteous cause of Muslims across the world, to live in a state that was entirely ruled by the Quran. Moussa told her that he hated living so far away from the closest mosque and watching women walking around "naked" when they should practice modesty and cover their bodies. These weren't ideas that he'd ever expressed before, so Sam was surprised. He said the stress of his status as an immigrant weighed on him—he was still waiting for a marriage-based green card, which meant that he couldn't travel outside of the US to go on vacation or visit his family in Morocco without jeopardizing his application.

Plus, the IRS had begun sniffing around Moussa's business, insisting he owed them back taxes that he wasn't equipped to pay.

It's impossible to know what Sam thought then about Moussa's plan. Though she admitted, later, that she knew Moussa watched Islamic lectures with his brother Abdelhadi, she was not well-versed in Middle Eastern politics: Most Americans only knew about ISIS from the news, which portrayed the Islamic State as barbaric, bloodthirsty. A few months earlier, in September 2014, the United States and dozens of other countries had formed a global coalition committed to "tackling [ISIS] on all fronts, to dismantling its networks and countering its global ambitions." But by all accounts, Sam was not a close follower of international politics. In a diary that she wrote several years later, Sam claimed that she sat there in shock, unable to fully comprehend what Moussa was saying. Her seemingly irreligious husband going to fight for a Muslim cause? It didn't make sense.

Soon after Thanksgiving, Sam confided in her friend Jenny, another employee at the shipping company, about what Moussa had told her. To Jenny, Sam made it seem "like it just was like a crazy idea that he had said. [Sam] was just like, 'He's so crazy.'" Later, Jenny would tell reporters that Sam "had to have known" that Moussa wanted to join ISIS. "I've thought like, maybe she felt like she had to, for the kids," she said. "I've seen a really manipulative side of Sam, that just kind of she'll do and say whatever she needs to say to just get her way."

Others, including Lori, agree: They believe that ever since Moussa shared his plans that Thanksgiving, Sam supported his decision to join ISIS and willingly helped with preparations to make it a reality. Sam told a different story in her diary, likely as an attempt to cast her behavior in a more favorable light: She claimed that a few days after Moussa declared his desire to join ISIS, he approached her at the shipping company's warehouse and apologized. She wrote that he said that he had spoken to his family and come up with a plan that didn't involve moving to Syria. "Let's buy a house in Morocco," he proposed. It could be close to his family in Rabat, and they could re-file his green card application at the US embassy there. Plus, real estate there was cheap—they could buy a beautiful apartment on the beach for less than $40,000 and use it as a vacation home. The time in an Islamic country would be good for him, Moussa claimed. While they were there he could work on his faith. It was a compromise.

In the diary, Sam wrote that she felt so relieved that Moussa was letting go of the whole ISIS thing that she started seriously considering his alternate plan. It was true that temporary relocation would solve a lot of the family's problems: She could actually afford to get her knee surgery there, for one. The FBI had also increased its scrutiny of what kinds of items customers were shipping through the business, so maybe it made sense to give things time to cool down. Besides, Sam felt like Moussa needed a change of environment. The fast pace of American life was running him ragged, and the easy access to drugs and sex workers wasn't a good combination with his lack of impulse control. In Morocco he could be in a more conservative environment, surrounded by loving family members who could guide him back to a healthier path. And Sam, estranged from her own family, claimed she liked the idea of getting close to Moussa's.

This period of her life, when Sam began preparing for her family to leave the United States, was almost as much of a turning point as the moment that she stood on the Syrian border just a short time later, watching her husband and their toddler daughter disappear into the night. Like almost everyone, Sam had, occasionally, already told stories about herself and her family that clashed with others' versions of events—in Yassine's domestic violence trial, for instance, where her testimony diverged from Lori's understanding of the situation and her expectations for Sam. But before this, before Sam started marshaling resources to take herself and her children abroad, her disagreements had been with her parents, her sister, her boyfriends. The series of events that began in the fall of 2014, in the living room of Sam and Moussa's house in Elkhart, would eventually put her narrative in dramatic conflict with a much larger entity: the government of the United States.

Sam and Lori, meanwhile, remained estranged. The next time Sam saw her sister was on November 28, 2014, around the same time Moussa first informed her of his interest in joining ISIS. It was Mac's fourth birthday, and Lori traveled up to Elkhart to throw a party for him at Chuck E. Cheese. Mac really wanted his cousins Michael and Nadia to come, so—despite her better judgment—Lori invited the whole Elhassani side of the family. On the day of the party, not a single one of them showed up. It was just Mac and Cassidy and Lori and the giant birthday cake, alone at Chuck E. Cheese. Mac was devastated, so Lori called Sam with a compromise, and left her a message. *Look, we're gonna do this again tomorrow,* she told

Sam. *You don't have to interact with me. Just bring the kids so they can see each other. This isn't about us; please just come to this little boy's birthday party.*

That night Lori went out and bought a second round of decorations and a new cake. The next day, Sam, Moussa, Michael, Nadia, and some of the other members of the Elhassani family showed up to celebrate with Mac. Lori stayed on the opposite side of the room, and they refused to talk to her.

In the winter of 2014, Moussa and Sam made the logistical preparations necessary to move abroad—to Morocco, Sam claimed to friends and family at the time, though an investigation by the FBI found no evidence that the couple ever intended to move to Morocco and in fact were preparing for their move to Syria. In December, Moussa booked airline tickets to Rabat for Sam, Nadia, and Michael. According to the FBI, Sam used her Facebook account to message someone in Istanbul who Moussa said could help her set up an international bank account during her overnight layover there. Then Moussa began taking some of the cash they had in their American bank accounts—about $60,000—and purchasing precious metals.

There was one problem standing in the way of their move: Michael didn't have a passport, and Sam needed his father's permission to get one issued. Even though she had primary custody, Sam knew Juan would never agree to let their son move abroad. If she was going to get the notarized affidavit from Juan authorizing the issuance of the passport, she would have to lie. Sam told him that Moussa's mother, Rkia, who had actually gone back to Rabat for a while, was dying in Paris, and that Michael needed a passport in order to go visit her. She paid for Juan to fly to Chicago so that they could sort through the paperwork. With no reason to believe otherwise, Juan signed the papers, and Michael got his passport.

On January 11, 2015, Sam, Michael, and Nadia boarded a flight from Chicago to Rabat. The trip was meant to be a chance for her to scout out some neighborhoods and potential real estate, Sam later claimed in her diary, but the FBI found no evidence she ever went house hunting, and instead maintain the trip to Morocco was a ruse for her failed attempt to open a bank account in Istanbul during her layover. In an email sent to his brother Abdelillah a few months after leaving for Syria, Moussa revealed that Sam used the trip as an attempt to smuggle some of their cash and gold into Morocco without the IRS or federal government confiscating it. "Sam

went to morocco [*sic*] to see if taking cash/gold was easy but those guys in the Mohamed V airport were very scary!" Moussa wrote. "They went through her luggage like crazy and confiscated many many things!"

While in Morocco, Sam, Michael, and Nadia stayed with Moussa's family at their spacious home in Rabat. According to the FBI's investigation, Abdelhadi and Moussa's budding fascination with Islamic extremism and Syria had begun to worry his family. During Sam's stay in Rabat, one relative told the FBI, a family member confronted her about Moussa's interest in ISIS. Sam responded with loyalty: *I support my husband,* she said. *And I would follow him anywhere.*

As soon as Sam returned home, she and Moussa started selling their belongings—their motorcycles, their cars, their furniture. If Sam really did believe the relocation to Morocco was temporary, it's unclear why she'd agree to sell off everything she owned in the US. As Sam busied herself with preparations, she stopped bothering to take Michael to school. For weeks Michael's teacher called every single day to inquire about his absences, until finally Sam gave in: *We're moving to Mexico,* she said, and until they left, Michael would be homeschooled. Sam told her friend Cassie that they were going to Morocco for a year or so to sort out Moussa's visa. To her friend Andria, she told another story entirely. "She mentioned that her and Moussa and the kids were going to Hong Kong for what she said was a business opportunity," Andria later said, but never mentioned going to Morocco.

If Sam and Moussa were truly planning to temporarily relocate to Morocco, why say so many different, conflicting things about the trip? Sam later claimed it was a stressful time and she couldn't remember why she kept changing her story. Moussa had been violent with Sam, and she'd told people she was afraid of him. It's possible that she wanted to tell her friends and Michael's teacher that they were leaving and where they were going, but she knew that there would be consequences if Moussa found out.

Moussa was interested in firearms, and with Michael home more, he and Sam started bringing Michael along to the nearby shooting range to practice his marksmanship. Sam had grown up around guns, having shot them on her grandparents' farm dozens of times, so taking her son to the shooting range felt like an old family pastime. Moussa kept dozens of guns around the house, high-capacity rifles shoved under the couch, shotguns with the barrels sawed off leaned up against the door frame. They lived in

Indiana, after all, where no permit or registration was required to purchase firearms. That Christmas, he'd gotten Michael, then seven years old, his own BB gun.

Michael was a natural with weapons: In February 2015, Sam started posting photos to Facebook bragging of his marksmanship skills: "At 60 ft with a .22," she captioned one photo of Michael at the gun range, outfitted in ear mufflers and protective glasses. "My kid is the shit." In another photo, which shows a gun range target covered in gunshot holes, Sam commented, "[Michael] is the next American sniper." That same day, Sam uploaded another picture of Michael posing with an assault rifle: "I'm so proud of [Michael]," Sam wrote. "He's truly a marksman! I can't believe how good he did!"

A week after Sam posted that photo of Michael at the gun range, the two were off to the Chicago airport for another international trip, while Nadia stayed behind with Moussa. Moussa had insisted that since Sam had been unable to open a bank account in Istanbul, they should start moving their assets to Hong Kong, where—at the time—there were no limits on the amount of cash and gold travelers could bring into and out of the country. He also said they should invest in gold instead of cash; that way they would burn through their money less quickly. Though she would later try to deny it to distance herself from Moussa's actions, Sam knew when she transported the money to Hong Kong that her husband intended to use it for ISIS; she also knew that Moussa couldn't transport the money himself, because his visa had expired, and his green card application was still pending, so he wouldn't be allowed back into the US.

The flight from Chicago to Hong Kong took more than fifteen hours. She and Michael snacked and watched movies on their seatback TVs as the plane flew over Canada, then Russia, then China. When they arrived on February 18, Sam was giddy; before this year, she had never been out of the country—now she'd been to two new continents in a little more than a month. She took Michael shopping at the open-air markets and to restaurants so he could try beef brisket noodles and sweet and sour pork and other Hong Kong dishes. The day after they arrived, Sam tried to visit a bank, only to discover she'd accidentally planned their trip over the Chinese New Year, and all of the banks were closed.

A few days later, when the holiday ended, Sam found she could not open an account—the branches she visited told her it was impossible to do

so without a Hong Kong ID—but she did secure a safe deposit box. That was good, but it meant she'd have to come back to Hong Kong with the cash they wanted to store instead of just doing a wire transfer. Sam and Michael returned to the United States and then, a few weeks later, on March 16, 2015, she and Michael again made the long trip to Hong Kong. This time, she had $30,000 in cash and gold melted down to look like jewelry tucked in her purse, which she purposefully did not declare on customs forms. She and Michael stayed only one day—just long enough to store the cash and gold in the safe deposit box—before making the trip back home to Indiana.

When Sam returned to Elkhart, she had what would be her final meeting as a source with the FBI. Knowing that she would be gone soon, she decided to tell her handler that they were temporarily relocating to Rabat. Perhaps she felt her working relationship with the FBI protected her from consequences, or that it would keep the Bureau from ever suspecting what she and Moussa were planning to do next; perhaps she was just too reckless to care. Either way, they didn't catch on that it was really Sam and Moussa—in addition to the shipping company's customers—who were the national security threat. "We're going to Morocco for three months so I can get knee surgery," she said, according to documents later filed in the case against her. It was the fourth version of events she had given to someone in the last month. Sam said Moussa's dad (actually an engineer by trade) could perform the surgery on her for free. Sam didn't mention that she'd been to Hong Kong, or that she was planning to travel there again just a few days later.

On March 22, 2015—four days after Sam and Michael returned from their second trip—Sam, Moussa, Michael, and Nadia boarded a flight in Chicago, again bound for Hong Kong. Because Moussa's US visa had expired, there was no turning back once they left US soil. Most likely to avoid suspicion, Moussa had booked round-trip tickets, which had them returning to the US three days later. They withdrew what was left of their savings from their American bank account, and boarded the plane.

As Sam prepared to leave the country, Lori was in Houston focused on getting her life together. She was taking telecom technician classes online at Penn Foster College and started picking up independent technician contracts at Walmarts and McDonald's around the area, upgrading their

POS machines. She wanted to save as much money as possible, so that if she ever got full custody of Mac and Cassidy, they'd have their own bedrooms and a nice home to live in with her in Houston.

Lori and Sam didn't talk again until September 2015, when Lori finally received a message from her sister on Facebook.

"I heard you were looking for me?" Sam wrote, according to screenshots of the conversation.

"Well, where are you?" Lori responded.

"Why do you wanna know?"

"Well, I'm worried about you. I heard you were in Texas."

After a few hours, Sam responded.

"WHO TOLD YOU THAT?"

"Well, I promised the person who told me that I wouldn't say who it was, so I can't tell you," Lori wrote back. "Are you in trouble? Can I help you in some way?"

"Why are you playing games with me?" Sam eventually responded.

"I'm not playing games with you," Lori replied. "I'm trying to help you."

"I'm not gonna talk to you if you're playing these games with me," Sam wrote.

Lori was getting fed up.

"Look, I'm not playing games with you," Lori shot back. "If you don't wanna talk to me, then don't talk to me. Maybe it's not time for you to talk to me yet. But as it goes, I'm just trying to help you."

Sam's tone shifted entirely, as if Lori had gotten through to her. She suddenly became friendly, open, willingly sharing information about her life. She told her younger sister that she was living in Irving, Texas, only a four-hour drive from Lori's apartment on the northwest side of Houston. It was a Friday morning, and Lori had been planning to drive to the area to pick up an Akita puppy she was adopting, so Lori suggested she stop in Irving and they meet at a coffee shop to try to repair their relationship. When Sam agreed, Lori was pleasantly surprised. Maybe she could finally get her sister back.

Lori loaded into her used, light blue Jaguar X-Type and drove straight north up route 45, through The Woodlands and the Sam Houston National Forest, blasting classic country from her car's CD player. When she neared Irving, she tried to call Sam to find out where and when she wanted to meet.

As the phone rang, Lori was giddy with the idea that she'd be reunited with her older sister after almost a year. Sam didn't answer, so she pulled over at a rest stop outside Irving and waited for her to call back. Fifteen minutes passed. Then thirty. Then an hour. Two. Sam never called. Lori sent dozens of Facebook messages, trying to find out what happened. Would Sam really make her drive out of her way on the promise of a meet-up and then just leave her alone on the side of the road?

When she got back to Houston that night, puppy in tow, Lori opened her laptop to check her email and found she'd received a message from Moussa. "you're a an [*sic*] idiot…" he wrote. Then he used her own children to taunt her. "Look what happened when I told your kids 'do you miss your auntie Lori?'" he wrote, attaching photos he'd gotten from Yassine of Cassidy and Mac playing happily on a playground, as if they were ignoring her, as if they didn't miss her at all. Maybe the weekly telephone calls weren't enough to solidify her presence in their lives.

"What exactly is your problem?" Lori responded.

A few minutes later, Moussa replied: "You."

Lori was furious. She'd tried to contact her sister to meet up with her, not her sister's crazed husband. "Thanks for the adult conversation," she wrote. "Nice to know you still cannot achieve maturity."

Lori didn't know it yet, but Sam and Moussa weren't in Texas. They weren't even in the US. Sam was long gone, so far gone that not even Lori could save her.

Chapter Eight

It's impossible to say exactly what happened when the family arrived in Hong Kong in March 2015, because for most of what transpired in the days that the family bounced from Hong Kong to Turkey and eventually to Syria, we have only Sam's account to go on. There are financial transactions, flight records, and hotel receipts, but the personal conversations that went on behind closed doors—and what exactly Sam knew—can only be gleaned from her personal diary. Sam's account, written after the fact in an attempt to establish her innocence, is unreliable, and in many ways conflicts directly with the evidence the FBI eventually presented against her. Like most of Sam's story, it's likely partially true and partially false. Below, Sam tells it in her own words, with the diary entries shown exactly as she wrote them:

> *Once we made it to Hong Kong, I was excited to show my husband the sites. Me and Matthew already had train cards and I knew the roads pretty well. I already knew a good hotel for us too. All of our plans revolved around Morocco. My husband seemed excited to go "home." There was no more talk about going to Syria but sometimes it came up when we would watch the news. It seemed as if he was more angry about what was happening politically than joining for religious reasons. He was still the same "non-practicing" muslim [*sic*] he'd always been. He liked it when I wore tight jeans and makeup. He wasn't the jealous type, not outwardly anyway.*

Sam went on to write that after a few days in Hong Kong, Moussa told her that his brother, Abdelhadi, was going to meet them in Hong Kong and then go on to Morocco with them. Moussa assured Sam that he'd still spend time with her. But he claimed that Abdelhadi was having problems with his wife and that he needed to be there for his brother.

Once a promising engineering student, Abdelhadi had struggled with mental illness for the last half decade, often sequestering himself inside his room at his parents' house near Chicago, where he spent hours scouring the depths of YouTube. It was there where he found the al-Awlaki lectures he liked to watch with Moussa, along with other Islamic State propaganda.

Abdelhadi and Moussa Elhassani were unwittingly becoming part of a growing phenomenon known as "jihad by family," or "kinship recruitment," in which siblings join extremist groups together. Many of the world's most well-known terror attacks were carried out by sets of brothers, including the

2015 attacks at the Bataclan in Paris (Salah and Ibrahim Abdeslam), the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre (Saïd and Chérif Kouachi), and the Boston Marathon bombing (Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev). This is especially true when the fighters come from outside Western nations: According to a New America study of 474 foreign fighters from twenty-five Western countries, one-third "have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives currently fighting in Syria or Iraq, marriage, or some other link to jihadis from prior conflicts or attacks." In fact, the US military believes that the number one predictor for becoming involved in an extremist group is having a family member in one. Abdelhadi, who had always been the most conservative of the brothers, was compelling bait for Moussa. Living in Middle America, with few fellow Muslims, Abdelhadi must have yearned to feel a part of something—even if that something would lead him and his brothers to prison, or worse.

Sam's diary continues:

> *I felt like his brother was coming between us. I was not excited at all. But I stayed supportive as usual. Once his brother flew in, we went to pick him up at the airport and bring him back to the hotel. I greeted him with a smile and a hug as usual. We all went back to the hotel. I got the key the [*sic*] his brothers room which was right next to our room. Before we could even make plans for lunch, I literally got the door shut in my face.*

Sam says she felt "a little shocked" but slinked back to her room. After a few hours of waiting, she texted Moussa and asked him what he was doing with Abdelhadi. He claimed they were arguing about booking flights to Morocco. Abdelhadi was a spendthrift, the total opposite of Moussa, so Sam seemed to buy the story and assumed they were probably just arguing about the cost of flights.

The brothers came up with a new plan: Abdelhadi would travel with the family from Hong Kong to Morocco, then return to the US. The way Sam tells it, she was trying her best to be supportive of her husband, but she was growing weary of being around Abdelhadi for so long.

> *I just had to stay patient with this new plan for a little while longer.*
>
> *OK, so our plane tickets were bought and we had I think a week to kill in Hong Kong. My husband spent a lot of time with his brother and insisted we don't go out much because it was*

very expensive and we still weren't sure how much it was going to cost to get started up in Morocco.

If you have visited Hong Kong, you would know how impossible it is to just sit in the hotel room four days. Especially with two kids. My son wanted to at least hang out with the men in the other room but they stayed shut in for hours at a time.

After days of being shut in in her hotel room, Moussa surprised Sam by saying that his brother would watch the kids so that the two of them could go out to dinner. She doesn't say much about that night—only that they "walked through the beautiful parks and ate a nice dinner."

When Sam asked Moussa what he and his brother had been up to, he said that they'd been shopping online for things they could buy in Hong Kong and resell in Morocco at a profit to cover moving expenses. Moussa told her that they'd found some binoculars that they could sell for double what they paid.

But it was a familiar story to Sam. She says that before Moussa boarded the plane to Hong Kong, he shipped a package to himself at the hotel that included a high-value rifle scope, something he said he could sell for more in Morocco than in the U.S. because "there were a lot of tourists that came to Morocco for hunting." According to Sam:

None of this brought up red flags. That's just how he was. So back to our date night… He said he needed me to go buy the binoculars because I knew the train stops better and I could navigate better. All of this was true. This would be a huge stress on him and I could take care of it no problem. Also, I really wanted to get out of the hotel room.

The next day, Sam's PayPal account was used to purchase six pairs of image-stabilizing binoculars from a local seller, and she took the train into downtown Hong Kong to pick them up. Moussa also had her meet a local seller at another train station to pick up a Tactical CQB Combo 2.5-10x40 rifle scope, purchased with Sam's eBay account.

Sam continues:

One night, him and his brother went out to buy merchandise. My husband had left his phone in the room. At an effort to understand my husband's strange behavior, I decided to look through his phone and see if I could make sense of things…. What I found I was completely shocked. I found text conversations between my husband and his brother talking about trying

to find a way into Syria. It seemed as if his brother was doing most of the work on this which was typical with his controlling nature.

The way Sam tells it, Abdelhadi was trying to convince Moussa that they could find a smuggler to help them cross into Syria. Moussa naively thought they could just buy their own motorcycles and simply cross through the desert without any help.

Sam's diary continues:

Most of the conversations had been obviously deleted. I desperately tried to find anything else in his phone that would help me know what the hell was going on. Everything had been deleted or he wasn't using his phone, I wasn't sure. The conversation insinuated crossing into Syria, but they didn't know which part to cross. They didn't seem to know which parts of the border were under control of Islamic State and which part were under control of other rebels and government….

My mind just shut down with confusion. I was overwhelmed. I thought we made it past this?! This was a huge change in me.

Sam claims it wasn't until *this* moment when she understood for the first time Moussa's intentions to go to Syria. Before she picked up his phone, she claims, she knew the money was for ISIS, and she knew Moussa was *interested* in ISIS, but she didn't think he would actually *go* to the Caliphate—and she certainly didn't think he'd take her and the kids with him.

Her diary continues with a direct address to the reader:

Dear Reader,

*At this point in the story, you must understand my heart caught up with my head. Excuse my language but I was never so fucking furious. Putting my feelings into words is really impossible. No one could ever understand how betrayed I felt. Oddly, more betrayed than everytime [*sic*] I caught him cheating and lying. No one would ever know the sacrifices I made, no one would know how much I ignored. His intent to cheat and do drugs all leading up to this? I realized at that moment, I would never be able to do enough to make him happy. I realized at that moment all the plans we had main [*sic*] was just an illusion. It was a moment in life I was completely out of control. What was true and what was a lie. I started thinking back on all the stupid things my husband does/did and I became furious. I think I was more tired than anything. Tired and beaten. He won and that's ok. I had a plan to get the last laugh.*

For their entire relationship Sam and Moussa had been both partners and rivals—they were deadlocked in a power struggle that animated every interaction they had, whether loving or spiteful. Moussa had won this round, but Sam was a survivor. She claims she resolved then to do anything she could to keep Moussa from moving to Syria.

Two days before they were supposed to leave Hong Kong, Sam received a strange Facebook message from her friend and former coworker Cassie. “Why did you lie to me?” it read. “Why couldn’t you have told me?”

“What are you talking about?” Sam replied, thinking Cassie meant she hadn’t told her about the move to Casablanca. “I didn’t tell you we were going to Morocco because I didn’t want you to talk me out of it.” Instead, Sam had told her they were going to Morocco for vacation, and to sort out Moussa’s citizenship paperwork.

“Not that,” Cassie responded. So Sam dialed her number while Moussa played on his laptop nearby. When Cassie answered, she told her that at a business meeting earlier that day, she learned that Sam and Moussa had gone to join the Islamic State.

“It’s not true!” Sam assured her friend. “Don’t worry. We’re going to Morocco, and I’ll be back in a few months.” When she hung up, she glanced over at Moussa, who was staring out the window of the hotel room. “Cassie says she heard we’re joining ISIS,” she announced. Moussa just shook his head. He called his family in Elkhart and started yelling in Arabic. Sam says she sat there silently, listening to a conversation about the future of her life that she couldn’t understand.

Sam writes emotionally about what happened next in her diary:

> *To be honest he wasn’t going allow [*sic*] me to seperate [*sic*] him and his daughter…. So, now I understand how dangerous the situation is. I’m out of the country with my husband telling me he is going to cross the border into a war torn country with my 2 year old daughter after exposing an elaborate lie. What the hell had he been planning to do? I mean, at this point, I wasn’t supposed to know anything and he didn’t know I knew before. But what I assumed was only going to be the 2 of them turned into the 3 of them. I was trying to stay a step ahead of him but obviously I was slower. Now I have choices: 1. Walk away with my son 2. Stay with my daughter and everything I had worked for.*

Since learning of Moussa’s definitive plan to go to Syria, Sam claims she’d made a major miscalculation: She assumed it would just be him and

Abdelhadi going to the Caliphate. Now, she realized, he'd been planning to take Nadia with him all along. If she wanted to keep that from happening, Sam says she believed her best option was to play along for a little longer; if she told him she didn't support him, or if she contacted any friends or even the authorities, he could take off with Nadia in the middle of the night.

Sam looked at her husband, the man with the goofy smile whom she had vowed to love and cherish until death did them part, the man who had spoiled her and complimented her and at one time had given her a shred of the stability she'd craved her whole life. She looked at that man, and she thought she might kill him. Instead, she claims she gave him a conciliatory smile. "I understand why you lied," she said. "I support you."

In her diary, Sam writes:

> *But as far as he was concerned, he believed I was supporting him the same way I had been supporting him for years. I hid the volcano that was inside me. I just had to stay relaxed.*
>
> *—Just to clarify something, he believed I was supporting him, but I made it clear that I would not cross the border. I told him I was going to Morocco—*

One day before they were set to leave Hong Kong, Moussa sent his sister, Zahra, an email, copying Sam, with information on how best to market their house in Elkhart. He'd decided to put it up for sale, indicating that their intention to move back to Elkhart had been false all along. "This is not a project house! This is ready for living in and needs no work!" the email read beneath a list of the house's various features, including new plumbing, keyless entry, and a "3500 Italian made stove."

According to flight records, on April 7, 2015, Sam, Moussa, Abdelhadi, Michael, and Nadia boarded a flight to Istanbul. On the plane, Moussa insisted that Sam sit next to Abdelhadi so that he could explain to her why, exactly, they had decided to join the Islamic State. So for more than ten hours, as Sam slumped uncomfortably in her seat on the sparsely populated plane, Abdelhadi rambled in his hushed monotone about ISIS.

In her reconstruction of the plane ride in her diary, Sam records the conversation she says they had about his and Moussa's desire to join ISIS. In Sam's telling, it went something like this:

"Even if we don't agree with the 'Caliphate' and everything they do," Abdelhadi explained, "we're still required as Muslims to join. And by convincing Moussa to go with me, I'm saving him from going to hell."

“Why would you want to go to a place where you’re basically guaranteed to die?” Sam asked.

A look of calm crept over Abdelhadi’s face. “Because it’s the fastest and most foolproof way to heaven,” he responded.

“Fine, but why do you have to bring Nadia into it?” she then challenged. “She’s your niece. Do you want *her* to die?”

“Moussa is required to take Nadia because she is a blood-born Muslim,” he responded. “If she dies, she’ll go straight to heaven.”

That wasn’t how Sam had been taught to view death. In the Witness community she was raised in, “death is the opposite of life.” It’s final, a state of simply ceasing to be. The family members she’d lost weren’t in heaven, they were in the ground, and if any of her children died in Syria, that’s where they would be, too. In her diary, she wrote that “the conversation of bullshit” went on for hours, until finally the plane began its descent.

Sam, Moussa, Abdelhadi, and the kids landed in Istanbul on April 7, 2015, with a flight to Casablanca scheduled for the next day. When they touched down in Turkey, Sam sent a message to her friend Cassie on Facebook Messenger updating her on their plans. “We are heading back to Morocco today for 2 weeks and then will be back :) I’m so ready to be home,” she wrote. “[I’m] so tired and ready to be in my bed! We will be able to get his [Moussa’s] papers straightened out in Morocco too thank god.” But instead of continuing on to Morocco, Sam says Moussa proposed an impromptu vacation around Turkey before he headed to Syria. He checked the family into a fancy hotel with sweeping views of the Bosporus. From there, he didn’t let Sam out of his sight.

Over the next few days Moussa was more generous than usual, taking Sam out to candlelit dinners while Abdelhadi watched the kids, buying her new clothes and jewelry and showering her with compliments. After a few nights in Istanbul, the whole family boarded a bus, which took them on a tour of several different cities over the course of the next week. It was almost like a vacation, except the ultimate destination, Sam knew, was war-torn Syria. She claims she still had no idea how or even if she was going to try to stop Moussa.

On the bus from Adana to Sanliurfa, a city less than an hour from the Syrian border, Sam writes that Moussa kissed her forehead and looked deeply into her eyes. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” he

whispered, according to her diary. “I love you so much, and I’m going to miss you so much.” Moussa told her no one would ever replace her, but when he arrived in the Islamic State he would be remarried. He wouldn’t divorce her, he said, and when the fighting was finished he and Nadia would come meet her and Michael in Morocco, where they could live as a family again. He put his arm around Sam and snuggled his nose into her neck like he used to when they were first falling in love back in Elkhart. To everyone else on the bus, they may have looked like a happy couple chatting about their shared future instead of what they were: two people desperately pretending they believed one another.

“I love you, too,” Sam writes that she muttered, as the bus sped through Gazientep and on to Sanliurfa.

Later, Sam would admit to the FBI that she knew all along the money was going to be used for ISIS when she smuggled it to Hong Kong. If she knew that, she must’ve also known what the rifle scopes and tactical gear she helped purchase on eBay were going to be used for, and why Abdelhadi was tagging along. There was no impromptu vacation in Istanbul, or a plan to “straighten out” Moussa’s papers in Morocco. The innocent portrait she painted of herself in her diary while awaiting repatriation to the US was simply for show; it was her Hail Mary move, the final card Sam had left to play in her deck.

Sanliurfa is nicknamed the “Jerusalem of Anatolia” and is considered holy by Jews, Christians, and Muslims because Abraham is said to have been born there. By the time Sam and her family arrived, the town had become infamous as a well-trafficked crossing point for extremists making their way to Syria. Enterprising smugglers set up operations in rural towns along the border of Turkey and Syria, charging wannabe jihadis thousands of dollars to guide them across, and this one was particularly popular. The borders there were porous, and in the early days the Turkish guards, many of whom supported the rebel uprising against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, did little to stop foreign fighters from crossing over into Syria.

By 2015, there were more than 20,000 foreign militants in Iraq and Syria, according to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, with nearly one-fifth “residents or nationals of Western European countries.” But Americans who traveled to the territory

—especially Americans with families—were much rarer. A 2018 report by the George Washington Center for Extremism stated that "since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has reported that 300 Americans attempted to leave or have left the US with the intention of fighting in Iraq and Syria." If there were more than 20,000 foreign militants in Iraq and Syria, that means Americans accounted for only 1.5 percent of them.

Allison Fluke-Ekren was one of few other female Americans who is known to have traveled to Syria and Iraqi territory to join the Islamic State. A now fortysomething former teacher from Kansas and mother of seven, Fluke-Ekren converted to Islam in her early twenties. Along with her husband, a Turkish international student she met at the University of Kansas, Fluke-Ekren slowly radicalized and moved with her young children between Egypt, Libya, and Turkey, before crossing the border and settling in Islamic State-controlled Syria in mid-2014, a year before Sam and Moussa ended up in Raqqa. Though her involvement in the Islamic State would be much deeper than Sam's, including planning attacks in the US and training women and children how to fight, the outcome of her fateful decision to join ISIS would be very similar.

When the Elhassani clan arrived in Sanliurfa in April 2015, they checked into a shoddy hotel and, according to Sam's diary, she developed the half-baked plan she had started to devise on the trip from Istanbul: convincing Moussa that his idea to cross into Syria by motorcycle was better than Abdelhadi's idea to use a smuggler.

> *I told my husband "I don't understand why your brother doesn't think it's a good idea? I think it's a good idea! Way better than getting a smuggler who will probably rob you and then take you to the police!" My husband's face lit up like a kid! He didn't even have to say anything, his face said it all. He couldn't believe I was supporting him.*
>
> *You should know, from the time I found out about this scheme, I only spoke about Morocco and why we couldn't just stick with the plan. I used all my conversation trying to de-moralize my plan. This would be the first supportive thing I've said. At that moment, me and my husband got a taxi and went to dealerships looking for motorcycles. I convinced my husband to do it without his brother. The way I convinced him was telling him if he was able to go across the border and see that everything was fine and come back, then I would go with him on his second trip. "It would be too much to bare living without you" and all that beautiful*

bullshit. I had him convinced to leave everything including [Nadia] with me to go check it out and then come back for us. Of course, by the time he would make it back, I would be gone.

Apparently it was not so easy to buy a motorcycle in Turkey. They spent the whole day trying, but they couldn't find anyone willing to sell one to a foreigner. That's when they got back to the hotel and received some "good news" from Abdelhadi: He had made contact with an ISIS member in Mosul who was originally from Canada, and "was apparently pretty well known," according to Sam. Abdelhadi showed her a picture of a tall Black man with a big beard standing in front of a Hummer with a jihadist flag painted on it. Sam says she couldn't believe what she was seeing:

I could hardly breathe… is this for real?! I heard my husband's brother listening to an audio message from the man saying, "If you are spies, we will surely know and cut off your heads." At that point, my husband gave his brother the "good news" that I would be joining them.

I came out of the bathroom almost having a panic attack. I said "Are you guys crazy?! He just threatened to cut off your heads!" My husband's brother responded "Only if we are spies and we are not spies."

*My husband took me aside and tried to calm me down. We took a walk up to the roof. I asked him "Are you really so stupid to cross the border with all the new camera equipment and binoculars cash and gold and expect not to be suspected of being a spy?!" He just told me to calm down and they would have "no proof" they were spies. I said to him "Ok, because we are going to a civilized country where you have to have 'proof' to execute someone?" That's when I confronted him with the executions made public. People kidnapped and then executed for no apparent reason except they didn't agree with islamic state creed. He said islamically [*sic*] they had a right to execute all those people. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I obviously was not speaking to my husband anymore.*

One morning, shortly after that conversation, Sam claims that Moussa told her to pack all their things, that they were heading to the airport for a flight to Morocco. She writes:

I was speechless, surprised! I couldn't say anything I just quickly started getting ready. I hugged and kissed my husband he smiled and said "I figured you would be so happy."

Sam did as Moussa said and loaded their belongings into a white van. She and her kids hopped into the back seats while Moussa and Abdelhadi

sat up front with another man. At first, Sam said everything seemed ordinary. But after not too long, she noticed something was wrong:

> *After about 20 minutes, I casually asked my husband "Where is the airport?" He quickly leaned over his seat, got close to my face and said, "Don't speak, these men should not hear your voice or hear you speaking English." I immediately knew I was not among friends. I ask my husband "What is going on?!" He responded "You are my wife and I'm telling you to be quiet."*
>
> *I start going through the situation in my head: 1) I'm in a car with my husband, his brother and two men I don't know. 2) I have been fooled into getting into the car 3) My husband is speaking to me in a way I have never heard. I feel myself starting to panic. I really don't know what to do.*

Ten minutes later, the van pulled up in front of a cement brick house with a corrugated metal roof. Sam started to panic. Were they even still in Turkey? The two men got out from the van and opened the back door. Moussa and Abdelhadi climbed out and reached for the luggage. Then Moussa moved the seat up so Sam and the kids could exit. When they were all out of the van, Moussa took Michael's hand and walked with Abdelhadi into the house. Sam and Nadia stood by the van, confused, until one of the men who'd been sitting up front gestured for her to come toward the house. In the doorway he directed her and Nadia into the room on the right, while Michael and the men went into the room on the left.

Sam writes that she entered a room decorated with dusty, low-slung couches and a china cabinet full of antique-looking dishes. Two other women, wearing full *niqab*, sat in the corner. Sam sat down with Nadia in her lap and tried to talk to them, but neither of them spoke English. Blissfully ignorant of the danger all around them, Nadia fell asleep in her mother's arms.

Sam didn't know it, but she'd landed at an ISIS safe house near the Turkish/Syrian border. At safe houses like this one, which dotted the border, smugglers met up with ISIS recruits to ferry them across the olive groves, under the wire fence and into Syria, where they could join the Caliphate. In the spring of 2015, when Sam found herself on the border, Turkish border security had gotten tighter than it had been over the last several years. But the smugglers were clever and the routes were well trod, having been used for centuries to move everything from pistachios to cigarettes between the

two countries; the Turkish border agents could be outsmarted, easily. Dozens of houses like the one Sam sat in were still in operation.

After she had sat silently in that safe house room for nearly an hour, Moussa opened the door and walked in matter-of-factly, betraying no emotion. Without saying anything, he took Nadia from Sam's lap, then grabbed for her handbag, which had all of their cash and passports in it. Sam followed him outside to where Abdelhadi and Michael were waiting. Her son seemed unharmed, a trusting smile on his face, excited to be reunited with his mom and completely unaware of their terrifying reality. Moussa loaded Nadia and Michael into the back of the van and he and Abdelhadi climbed in behind them. By then it was after dark, and Sam had no passport, no money, and no idea where she was. She was certain the people who ran the house were terrorists. In her diary, Sam writes that she was unsure of what to do next, so she slowly climbed into the van and shut the door.

A few minutes later, the van stopped between two houses in a suburban neighborhood. Moussa climbed out and picked up Nadia, then Abdelhadi emerged and took Michael's hand. Without a word, Moussa started walking into the darkness with Nadia. This is the moment, the moment Sam describes as her final, most terrible realization. This is when she says she knew—not in Hong Kong, and not in Istanbul, and not in Sanliurfa—what was happening. They were still in Turkey, but only just, and her husband was about to walk with her children across the border to Syria. Sam writes:

> *My husbands brother turns and looks at me and says "Come on! Quick we have to go!" I feel frozen in my spot, the spot I am standing in outside the car. I can no longer see my husband and daughter in the distance. The only thing going through my mind is I will never see her again. Everything in slow motion, his brother calling me. I'm just trying to get a glimpse of my husband and my daughter but they are gone. I took a step and kept walking. I thought if I could catch up with them, we would just be able to walk back again.*

Sam had spent her whole life using her sexuality and her humor and her intuition to manipulate people into doing what she wanted—with Moussa it was like she'd finally met her match. She'd thought she was in control, but it had been him all along. Her feelings of power were an illusion. Moussa was going to Syria—and she and the children were going with him.

Sam isn't the first ISIS wife to claim that she was tricked into going to Syria; in fact, the vast majority of women who managed to survive living in the Caliphate claim that they, too, were the victims of coercive husbands who dragged them against their will across the border. Sam has a harrowing personal history, full of violence, abuse, and economic and social limitations. But the story she tells, about this moment and others, is a *story*—sometimes supported by other evidence and sometimes not. It's much more complicated than the heartbreaking scene that she paints in her diary. Messages she sent to friends and statements she later gave to the media contradict her claims that she was forced across the border by her abusive husband.

Not long after she crossed into Syria, on April 13, 2015, Sam received a Facebook message from her friend Cassie asking if it was going better in Morocco than on her previous trip. "Yes, much better," Sam replied. "We're relaxing and having a good time here." Later, Sam would tell a journalist that she couldn't remember exactly if it was her or her husband who had written that message, but that it had been sent after they crossed into Syria. As for why she lied to Cassie instead of telling the truth and asking for her friend to tell the police so they could get her out of there? Sam had no explanation. When the same journalist asked her point-blank if, of all her bad choices, one of them was making the decision to go to ISIS, Sam replied in a manner much more vague than the portrait of herself she'd painted in her diary. "I can't answer that question because it has to do with the case," she told him.

When Sam, Moussa, Abdelhadi, and the kids crossed over into Syria in April 2015, the two Elhassani brothers became two of the estimated 30,000 foreign fighters who had joined ISIS by the end of 2015. Though they were technically Moroccan nationals, the brothers had spent the last decade building lives for themselves in the United States. Now they were rejecting the American dream they had left Rabat to pursue to wage war on the ideals they'd spent the last ten years living by. And Sam, as American as apple pie, was going with them.

By mid-2015, ISIS was globally recognized as an extremist terrorist organization willing to engage in increasingly barbaric practices in pursuit of cash, weapons, and territory. It had beheaded British, American, and French citizens in front of cameras; terrorist attacks in its name had been

carried out across the globe, including the horrifying *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris that killed twelve people

The Islamic State's successful propaganda campaigns were crucial to the spread of its ideology, and the spread of its ideology was crucial to accumulating fighters and capital. The group was well aware of this, pouring as many resources into the "media jihad" as it did the actual one. But ISIS's propaganda was just that: propaganda. It depicted life within the Caliphate as a utopia, a place where Muslims could live by the creed of Allah while also amassing vast wealth, settling in lavish mansions, and marrying multiple young wives. The goal was to attract young recruits to fight and probably die for a cause they barely understood; it was far easier to get to ISIS-controlled territory than it was to leave it.

Real life in Caliphate-controlled areas like Raqqa, where Sam and her family would eventually end up, was nothing like the glimmering paradise ISIS had promised. There were mansions to live in, sure, but they were ransacked and half-destroyed by warplanes, having been hastily abandoned by their former residents out of fear and desperation. There was fresh produce—the trade routes between ISIS-controlled territories and the outside world remained open until coalition forces started attacking Raqqa in earnest—but it was reserved largely for high-ranking officials, and prices were wildly inflated. Under ISIS administration, the regular citizens of Raqqa were forced to line up with buckets in meandering lines, waiting hours for a few ladles of soup.

Movement in ISIS territory was severely restricted, particularly for women, who weren't allowed to leave the house without a *mahram*, or male guardian. Smoking, drinking, and socializing with anyone of the opposite sex was strictly forbidden, as was listening to music or cursing aloud in public. Punishments were based on ISIS's interpretation of *sharia* law and were severe: Men who stole to feed their starving families had their hands chopped off, women whose *niqabs* appeared too see-through in the scorching summer sun were whipped until they bled. For anyone accused of working with the West or the Free Syrian Army, the punishment was far worse: public beheading, the announcement of which would be delivered over the mosque's loudspeakers, so crowds could gather and watch what would happen to them if they committed the same crime.

This is the Raqqa that Sam would soon encounter, as she sped across northern Syria in a darkened van, the passing countryside pockmarked with

scraps of shrapnel and the charred remains of exploded cars. Every freedom that made life worth living—the freedom to gather, to celebrate, to worship, to rejoice—had been stripped from the city by violent men animated by greed and corrupted piety. In Raqqa, men would tell her what to do and how to act and what to wear; they would tell her how to pray and what to eat and who to love, and they would enforce her obedience through intimidation and violence. In that way, at least, Raqqa might feel slightly familiar. It might feel like a warped version of home.

Chapter Nine

In the spring of 2015, when Sam crossed the border with Moussa and her children, Lori was still in northwest Houston, trying to start over. After apprenticing with Sam's old boyfriend Raf, she'd received her certification to work as a telecom repair technician, and in Texas she made a decent living working as a freelance contractor for companies like Comcast. She adopted an Akita she called Enkidu, a name from the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and lived with Hariss whenever he wasn't on the road.

Lori and Raf continued traveling around the South and Midwest to perform telecom renovations, mostly on Best Buy stores. Raf became one of Lori's only close friends. Lori had always liked Raf—they both worked in telecommunications and loved taking their adopted dogs to the park, and they were bonded by Sam's tempestuous presence in their lives. They'd go to karaoke together and scream-sing oldies, play endless pool games, spend evenings headbanging at dance clubs, and eating tacos. Even though Lori had temporarily relinquished custody of Cassidy and Mac, Raf liked that she cared about being a role model to her children in the same way he did, which was something he and Sam had always sparred over. To Raf, it was as if Lori was everything Sam had pretended to be: educated, family-oriented, intellectually driven. In Texas, as they grew closer, Raf thought: that whole time he and Sam were together and Sam was trying to be someone she wasn't? That was Sam pretending to be Lori.

Aside from Raf and Hariss and the dogs, Lori's new life was lonely. She constantly missed her sister. She'd only spoken to Sam once in the last few years, over Facebook when Sam said she'd meet for coffee in Irving. But Lori could never bat away the feeling that something with Sam was deeply wrong.

In October 2015, about a month after their failed meetup, Lori's suspicions were confirmed. She was on the way home from a renovation job at Best Buy when her dad, Richard, called her on her cell phone.

"Do you know where Sam is?" Richard asked.

"No, I haven't heard from her," Lori replied. "I told you, I tried to meet with her in Irving in September and she never showed up."

"Well," Richard took a deep breath. "The FBI is looking for her."

Lori's stomach dropped. She *knew* Sam was in trouble, and the FBI had been sniffing around the shipping company's operation for some time now. Was Sam going to be charged with a crime? What had her older sister gotten herself into now?

"Well, I haven't heard from her," Lori finally responded. "Do you know why the FBI is looking for her?"

"They didn't tell me," Richard said. "They just asked me if I knew where she was."

Even though their relationship was sometimes destructive, Sam was Lori's sister. She had been searching for Sam for over a year, ever since their fallout in the parking lot of Juicy Tattoo. She'd heard slivers of gossip —*Sam was living in Texas, Sam was moving abroad, Sam and Moussa were taking a break*—but after their failed meetup the month before, she hadn't heard a word.

It was October 2015, and Sam and the kids were by then settled in Raqqa. ISIS had become a household name in the West, after the brutal acts the group committed in 2015—the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, terrorist attacks in Tunisia and Libya, videos of murders—were highly publicized. But though Lori knew that Sam was missing, she had no idea that her sister was involved with ISIS.

October turned into November, and December gave way to 2016. By March, Lori's attempts at getting full custody of her kids had proven unsuccessful—so unsuccessful that Yassine had ended up with primary custody, and Lori was only allowed to see Cassidy and Mac on weekends.

With weekend visitation of the kids and endless court appointments, it didn't make sense for Lori to live in Texas anymore. Besides, Hariss's truck-driving job meant they could technically live anywhere. In March 2016, Lori moved out of the Houston condo and back to Indiana. She was determined to get her kids back. And she was determined to find her sister.

Even after everything that had happened, Lori missed her. Sam had shared the same experiences growing up, had laughed at the same stupid jokes her dad made and been hurt by the same sting of his belt, and she was the only person Lori could really be herself around. Sam was her lifeline, the thread that connected her past to her present to her future. The sisters had always needed each other with the fierceness of lovers, their attachment wound up in Lori's need to save Sam, and Sam's need to be saved. But it was an unhealthy, lopsided relationship, one in which Lori gave and Sam

took, Sam broke and Lori fixed, Lori was the martyr and Sam was the villain. It was not as simple as “godly” and “evil,” the Witness concepts they’d been raised with. Lori wasn’t the “good” sister and Sam the “bad” one, though sometimes it served them both to think of it that way. The reality of their codependency was far messier. Theirs was a bond that confused sacrifice for love, pity for fondness, fear of abandonment for familial obligation. And without Sam, Lori felt lost.

Back in Indiana, Lori moved into a two-bedroom apartment in South Bend’s Castle Point complex, a maze of stone buildings with citadel-like towers at the front gate. It was the kind of place designed to look regal on the outside to mask the shoddiness of the apartments on the inside. She was excited to have a stable living situation in South Bend and to be able to see Cassidy and Mac more often. The complex had its own dog park, where she would take her dogs, Jewel and Enki, to chase tennis balls across the lawn. She enrolled in business management classes at Penn Foster and continued to sell handmade clothes through her online business.

Being around her kids on a regular basis made Lori feel like she could breathe again. That whole first year back in Indiana, she spent every moment she could with them, taking them to play on the playground at McDonald’s, playing dress-up, going shopping for silly costumes. She loved to braid threads from her crocheting into patterns in Cassidy’s hair as she sat and patiently read a book. For Mac, a science fiction fan, she got a *Star Wars*–themed baseball cap that he liked to wear backward on their trips to Chuck E. Cheese. Lori loved being a mom—it gave her purpose—and she was intent on being a different kind of mother than her own, or than Sam. Both had been distracted by their own demons—for Lisa, it was religion, and for Sam, men—but the results were the same. Lori regretted that her fraught relationship with their father had meant she’d had to spend chunks of her children’s lives apart from them. Now that they were reunited, she refused to let Cassidy and Mac ever feel neglected, abandoned, or secondary again.

Unlike Sam, Lori didn’t court danger; the things she wanted out of life were much simpler. She craved stability, and a family who loved her. She wanted to have her children near her always and help them grow into productive members of society. Lori started dreaming of buying a large parcel of land in Oklahoma or Texas so that she could have a goat farm to

leave to her kids someday. She wanted them to have advantages in life that she never did; maybe that way they'd turn out differently.

Almost a year after Lori moved back to Indiana, in February 2017, she finally heard from her sister. Lori was doing some work on the computer when she received an email from a relative, saying that Sam was trying to get in touch with her. Lori was desperate to know where Sam was, so even though she was bitter about the last year of silent treatment, she agreed to reach out. She could tell something was off—there was no way Sam would want to talk just to catch up. Something was definitely wrong, Lori decided, and Sam likely needed her help.

Lori opened up a new message in Gmail and decided not to beat around the bush. "How can I help you?" she typed into the window, and hit send.

A few days later, Sam responded.

":) You sound like you work at Wal Mart," she wrote. "How can I help you? What's that supposed to mean?"

Lori responded immediately. "I didn't mean it that way," she typed. "I meant that I know you're in trouble—what can I do to help you?"

Lori hit send, and then she waited.

After Moussa, Sam, Abdelhadi, and the kids walked across the border from Turkey to Syria in the summer of 2015, a van with blacked-out windows picked them up on the other side. Soon they were hurtling across the Syrian countryside. If she'd been able to see out, Sam would have seen them speeding past grain silos and crop fields that looked like they'd been burned. Sam's whole life she had convinced herself that no matter what terrible situation she ended up in, she could flirt or cajole or appease her way out. But here, now, there was no escape. She was truly trapped.

When the van pulled up to a tan house three hours later, Sam and the kids were ordered out while Moussa and Abdelhadi stayed in the van. She had no idea when or if she'd see her husband and brother-in-law again. A female soldier with a gun slung over her shoulder stood in the doorway and beckoned her inside as the van carrying her husband peeled off into the night. Sam was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, so she was given a set of new clothes—a long billowy *abaya*, a thick *niqab* that covered her face and eyes, gloves, and a headscarf, all black. In the US Sam had painted her aqua eyes in dramatic dark liner; she also wore a silver nose ring and several earrings in each ear. Those days were over now: Makeup and nail polish

were forbidden in the Caliphate, as were shoes or purses in any color other than black. The Islamic State strictly enforced this dress code; any woman who dared to disobey would be arrested, flogged, and jailed for several days.

After Sam emerged in her new attire, she asked the female fighter in painstakingly slow English where exactly they were. Raqqa, she replied.

Raqqa was an ancient city on the northeast bank of the Euphrates River, about two hours from the Turkish border. Since the early ’70s, the nearby Tabaqah Dam had provided job opportunities for the residents of Raqqa, as the town became a supply center for the community of workers around the dam. The area’s fertile landscape meant that before the Islamic State, it grew a large percentage of the nation’s crops, including 38 percent of the cotton and 48 percent of the pomegranate supplies. But during the Syrian Civil War in 2013, when anti-government Syrian opposition groups took over the city, it quickly became overrun with militant factions like the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq, each vying for control of the territory. In January 2014, the Islamic State took full control of the city, and declared Raqqa as their de facto capital.

By the time Sam arrived in Raqqa in mid-2015, it had been under ISIS control for more than a year. There was a saying among the locals in Raqqa: “Death is death.” What they meant was that death had become so routine—first during the revolution against Bashar al-Assad, and then under the bloody rule of ISIS—that it was almost impossible to view it with anything other than apathy. Everyone had lost someone they loved; grief clung to all attempts at normalcy. Even contempt and outrage were hard to muster, as the people of Raqqa became more and more resigned to their calamitous fate. Fault lines were drawn within families between the men who joined ISIS and those who did not. The men who joined earned higher salaries than what they could earn without ISIS, making them better able to support their families in an increasingly dire situation. Those who didn’t lived mostly in hiding, emerging onto the streets only for the most basic essentials, eyes glued to the ground. They tried their best to disguise their fear, because fear was a dead giveaway that you were against ISIS and what it stood for. If ISIS believed you were against them—or worse, that you were working for infidels like the Americans—they would jail you or kill you in the cruelest, most public way imaginable.

Sam and the kids moved into a house for women and children called a *maqar*. It was one of many around the so-called Caliphate where already-married women were placed under house arrest while their husbands completed mandatory military and religious training. Unmarried female ISIS members who had come to Syria looking for handsome jihadi husbands were kept in separate houses for single women, where they waited to be selected for marriage. Despite the chaos surrounding them, the mood in the houses was characterized primarily by boredom; forms of entertainment like novels and television were banned, and the women weren't allowed to venture out alone, so they were limited to cooking, cleaning, and talking among themselves in whatever bits of shared language they could stitch together. While their husbands learned about combat and the religious justifications for jihad, the women in the *maqar* were taught how to play their own role in the ISIS system: Their primary duty was to support their husbands in their quest for jihad and raise faithful Muslim children.

The women in the *maqar* came from all over the world, including European countries like France and Germany, but Sam was the only non-Muslim. They all believed—or at least claimed to believe—that it was their spiritual duty to make *hijrah* and migrate to the Caliphate to build a global Muslim community based on the principles of *sharia*, Islamic law. They were earnest and ardent and willing to do anything to empower the organization, whether it was staying at home to care for their families or joining the all-female Al-Khansaa Brigade, which policed the streets and arrested female civilians for committing infractions.

Even though she'd followed her husband into Syria to join an Islamic extremist group, Sam didn't pray five times a day or fast when she was supposed to, and the women in the *maqar* viewed her with suspicion. She began to mirror their routines simply to survive; she had no idea what would happen to her and her children if ISIS officials learned she wasn't Muslim, and she didn't want to find out. When she first arrived, Sam did not cover her hair or dress in conservative clothing. She didn't know how to perform *wudu*, the ritual cleansing of the body performed five times a day, before each prayer, and she certainly couldn't read from or quote the Quran.

The majority of the women who lived in the *maqar* spoke Arabic, and Sam couldn't communicate with them. A few weeks into her stay, a big-boned, French-speaking female ISIS official came to the *maqar* and, when

Sam heard her speaking English she eagerly approached her. The woman wore thin wire-framed glasses over her *niqab* and was so tall her head almost touched the door frame. According to Sam's diary, she introduced herself as *Umm Adam,* and when Sam said her name was Samantha Elhassani, the woman corrected her: *Umm Nadia*, she said, a common Arabic name construction that meant "mother of Nadia" which ISIS had appropriated as a sort of identity-obscuring nickname. Then Umm Adam asked Sam where she was from.

"America," Sam told her matter-of-factly. She was so relieved to find someone who spoke English. Maybe this woman could tell her what was going on.

Instead, Umm Adam spat on the floor. "I hate Americans," she announced. Then she turned around and left the room, her black *abaya* trailing after her.

Moussa lacked the intensive knowledge of the Quran that ISIS required of its fighters, so he was forced to go through Quranic recitation drills alongside sniper training. Sam and the kids waited in the *maqar* for three months. When a guard finally took them to meet him, Sam barely recognized her husband: He was skinny and dirty and had a rifle slung over his shoulder. The man she knew in Elkhart had a round face, with a smile that made his eyes into sleepy half-moons, and a little bit of stubble on his chin. Now, he sported the same bushy beard as his new comrades.

In her diary, Sam claims she ran up to him and started screaming. "You're crazy and I'm leaving!"

Moussa just grinned. "Go ahead," he said. "You can try, but you won't make it."

Even if she really had wanted to leave, it was impossible. He still had her passport. She didn't speak Arabic. Women weren't even allowed to leave the *house* without an escort, let alone ISIS territory. For Sam and all the other women living in Raqqa under ISIS, the city had become a jail, patrolled by madmen who feared no one but God. What she had to do now was survive.

On August 19, 2015, Moussa's mother, Rkia, who claimed that at the time she believed Moussa, Sam, and the kids were in Turkey, sent him an email, with the rest of the Elhassani family copied on the email:

> Hello, Moss,
>
> I'm waiting [for] a word from you…, but nothing. I've waited forever. I wanted to have a sign of life from you. I want[ed] to write [to] you for your birthday.
>
> What's going on with Sam? With the kids?
>
> What are you trying to say of this silence? It's very hard, hard…. [D]o you need help? Do you want us to come help? Tell us something. We are awaiting your response.

A few days later, Moussa responded, writing that he missed his family very much and had recently purchased a home. "Please pray for us and tell baba to do the same. Please tell him not to pray against us." Then, in bold and italic font: "***We have nothing to do with the war going on.***" In fact, he added, "we see no sign of it! The media makes it seem big but I swear I have not seen no sign of it!!" He wrote that Sam and the kids had settled in "the reef, it [is like] farmlands away from any village or city." He didn't say in which country or region, specifically, the family were, but he said they lived close to a big river, with unlimited water but no electricity, and that everything was extremely cheap:

> Alhamdoulillah with the money we saved we are living really good!! A chicken buritto made of organic chicken and organic vegetables costs 75 cents!!! 2 pounds of bread cost 1$!!! (that comes up to 12 rolls of french bread!!!). The house we bought is about 100 square meter. It cost us $5000 only! We were going to buy a 1000 square meter mansion by the river for around 36000$ but that would leave us broke.

Moussa explained to his family why they decided to leave the US. "I was tired of being illegal," he wrote, and "the IRS was sending me letters…. Even if I figured out something with the IRS and immigration, I would have been legal but poor with no money except a house that was falling apart and an extremely cold winter!"

Moussa also instructed his father not to "pay so much attention to Abdelhadi's emails," indicating that his younger brother had continued to email the Elhassani family religious propaganda, even after they crossed into Syria. In a court hearing in January 2022 about his citizenship, Abdelillah—the brother who lived in California and owned the shipping company—stated that his family assumed from the emails that Abdelhadi had joined a religious extremist group but didn't know it was ISIS. "[Abdelhadi] listens to too many shouyoukh's mp3's and youtubes videos," Moussa wrote to his family, directly confirming Abdelhadi's radicalization

through the internet. “He doesn’t know that those shouyoukhs only talk and don’t do nothing!!! Abdelhadi knows that; that is why he is at his farm house watching his brand new Panasonic flat screen TV eating a lamb buritto that cost him 90 cents!” Though Abdelhadi’s emails are not part of the public record, Moussa’s description of them to his family makes it seem as if Abdelhadi told them outright he was sworking with a religious extremist group. “**Please please please ignore what abdelhadi is saying he is doing nothing but sitting home and watching aljazeera**,” Moussa insisted.

Though Moussa didn’t outright say that he, Sam, and Abdelhadi had moved to Syria, he did allude to it, mentioning Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, and the war:

> Please don’t be mad at us for leaving. Inchallah soon the borders will open up… new american president and inchallah they will get rid of bashar and things will become even better… right now[,] we keep to ourselves and no one come to bother us… there is no police on the road or army people… where we are at it is completely safe bi idni allah!

In truth, the brothers were actively working with ISIS, though they were likely keeping the specifics from their family to avoid getting them into trouble with American and Moroccan authorities. When Moussa and Abdelhadi finished their mandatory military training, Abdelhadi moved to a house outside of Raqqa and married a Syrian woman. Sam, Moussa, and their two children moved into a small one-story home with a courtyard on the outskirts of Raqqa. The walls were sun-bleached and pockmarked with bullet holes, and stray cats roamed the rubble that ringed the house. Occasionally Moussa would show up from the front lines with small gifts for the family or take them out for *kibbeh* at a nearby restaurant. Because their house was in a fairly isolated area of the Syrian countryside, Sam had more freedom than the ISIS wives who lived in central Raqqa and suffered under the watchful gaze of the morality police. At home or in her yard she didn’t have to cover her hair or wear the long black *abaya*, and there were fewer people around who might spy on her behavior or report her to the authorities. Even though she was stranded without transportation in a house on the outskirts of Raqqa, she had more control over her life than many of the wives of ISIS fighters who lived in the city and were barely allowed to leave the house.

Sam spent most of her time alone with Michael and Nadia, occasionally venturing next door to have tea and furtively smoke cigarettes with her Syrian neighbors, who were also suffering under ISIS occupation. They hated Moussa and Abdelhadi, who came by frequently, but had a soft spot for Sam, who they thought wasn't like the other Western wives of ISIS fighters and clearly struggled to protect herself and her kids from ISIS involvement, even though Moussa often beat her for disobeying. Most of the neighbors were unsympathetic to their occupiers' cause and had fled Raqqa for the outskirts of the city to try to make their living on the edges of the ISIS economy. Three of Sam's neighbors hawked homemade soap by the kilogram, going neighborhood to neighborhood and selling it to housewives who needed it for dishes and clothes. Men tried to support their large families on the pittance they made on subsistence farming crops like wheat—sometimes just $20 a week—to avoid having to accept handouts from the Islamic State, but inevitably one of the older sons would discover that if he joined the ranks he could get a free house, a car, and a generous salary of more than $200 a month, and he would decide that occasionally having to shoot off some rockets wasn't that bad of a trade-off. It was the same wherever ISIS conquered: Either you were with them and had something, or you were against them and had nothing.

A few weeks after arriving in Raqqa, Moussa again began using stimulants. Whereas in Elkhart Moussa had stuck primarily to snorting drugs and swallowing pills, now he would shoot up whatever he could get his hands on, including painkillers, antidepressants, and testosterone. Studies of and interviews with ISIS fighters have found that drug use is very common among the group's members, so Moussa wouldn't have been alone; militants would often take a highly addictive amphetamine called Captagon, which kept them awake and alert, allowing them to fight for longer periods without rest. The drugs exacerbated Moussa's paranoia and violent tendencies; when he was home from battles, he would hit, kick, and verbally abuse both Sam and the kids. In Elkhart, he'd never abused the kids—now in Syria, hopped up on drugs, he seemed to derive pleasure from it. There were no police from whom to seek protection and the hospitals were overrun with those injured in battle.

It was the summer of 2015, and ISIS—having conquered more territory than ever before—continued its onslaught across Syria and Iraq. The group had stuck to its two-pronged offensive strategy, conducting terrorist attacks

across different continents while also capturing land in Syria and Iraq for its so-called Caliphate. The strategy was meant to make ISIS feel like a global phenomenon, so that everyone, everywhere—not just the people of Iraq and Syria—feared its rule.

In October 2015, ISIS turned its focus to conquering northwestern Syria, creeping ever closer to Aleppo, the country's largest city at the time. As Syrian government troops battled with rebel groups, the country was carved into slices of territory over which control was constantly shifting. Much of northeastern Syria surrounding Raqqa was controlled by Kurdish separatists, who had gained de facto autonomous control of the region during the Syrian Civil War. That October, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) declared the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella network of Kurdish troops who would help fight against both ISIS and the Syrian government. The majority of Syria was now ruled by those warring factions—the Islamic State, the Syrian government, anti-Assad Islamic rebel groups not affiliated with ISIS, and the SDF, whom Western countries had begun financially supporting as a way to defeat ISIS. Moussa, an ISIS sniper, took part in the battles against all of them. He would go to the front for a month at a time, and when he was gone the house felt more relaxed. For those living in Raqqa, the days could be tedious, all-consuming in their monotony. Television and nonreligious texts were technically banned, as were smoking and drinking, but the underground market teemed with forbidden goods. Sam never quit smoking, getting her cigarettes from friendly neighbors; Moussa bought the kids a television so they could watch cartoons dubbed in Arabic.

When they'd first arrived in Raqqa, the war had seemed far away, something Moussa had to travel to. But the longer they stayed, the more it closed in on them. On November 13, 2015, ISIS staged a multipronged attack at several popular locations in Paris, including the nightclub the Bataclan, ultimately killing 130 people and injuring more than 350. Two days later, in retaliation, France—one of the eighty-five countries that had joined the US to form the Global Coalition against ISIS in 2014, increased its air strikes on Raqqa. Sirens constantly wailed with warnings of air strikes, sending people scrambling to take shelter. Mortars fell several times a day; shrapnel, rocks, and glass rained down from the sky. The bombs were louder than anything Sam had ever heard, each one a lightning bolt to the brain.

Though Moussa hadn't been interested in having more kids back in the States, in Raqqa he was insistent. The easiest way for men to reach a higher status within the ISIS system was to have as many children as possible. The more children the fighters could father, the more fighters they would eventually have for the cause. At night after the kids were asleep Moussa would force Sam to have sex, and not long after their arrival in Syria, she became pregnant with their second child.

When Sam missed her period and realized she was pregnant, she tried to hatch an escape plan; she couldn't imagine raising another child in the gruesome theater of violence and hopelessness that had become their lives. When Moussa went out to meet some friends later that week, Sam gathered the courage to ask one of her ISIS-hating neighbors if he knew anyone who could help her and her children escape. She had money, she said, if only the man could find her a smuggler. The neighbor, desperate for money for his family, agreed, and they settled on a plan: The next time Moussa left for the front lines, Sam and the kids would pack their things and escape with the smuggler.

They never got the chance. Two days before Moussa was due to leave, the family was sitting in their living room watching television when, according to Sam, ISIS soldiers suddenly kicked the door in. Eight masked members of the Islamic State's dreaded security force rushed into the house and surrounded Sam and Moussa with their automatic weapons pointed. They started shouting in Arabic and Moussa shouted back. Sam picked up Nadia, who had broken into wrenching sobs, and pulled Michael tight to her. He clung to her leg and asked over and over in his tiny voice, "Mom, what's going on?"

When a rangy woman covered in full *niqab* strode into the house, Sam and Moussa's dog, a stray puppy they had rescued, started barking hysterically. Without hesitating, the woman casually landed a kick to the puppy's stomach, and it yelped and ran out the front door. Then two of the masked men pushed Sam to her knees and handcuffed her hands behind her back; another two blindfolded Moussa, handcuffed him, and led him out the door and into a car. Sam heard the car rumble off. She was alone.

The tall woman surveyed the scene with a sense of serenity, as if she had just arrived for vacation at a seaside resort. The soldiers began ransacking the house, seemingly searching for "evidence" of the family's wrongdoing. Sam claims in her diary that she had no idea why they were

there or what she was being accused of. It couldn't be her escape plan, because why would they also take Moussa? She knelt, hunched and handcuffed, in her living room, as the woman stared at her coolly from behind her wire-framed glasses.

After a few moments the female guard unsnapped the gun from her holster and approached Sam. She put the cool metal of the gun to Sam's forehead and asked calmly in English, "Umm Nadia, do you remember me?"

Sam stiffened. It was Umm Adam, the French-speaking woman who had been so nasty to her back in the *maqar*, who had spit on Sam and declared her hatred for Americans. After their encounter, Sam had learned more about Umm Adam through the other women in the *maqar*: She was a seasoned jihadist from Morocco who had lost her husband and son in an American drone strike in Afghanistan. Now she and her surviving son had moved to Syria to join the Islamic State.

This woman, whom Sam describes at length in her diary, was likely Fatiha Mohamed Taher Housni al-Mejjati, a Moroccan ISIS militant who went by "Umm Adam" and was part of ISIS's media committee. Umm Adam was in charge of the matchmaking network between fighters and women in Syria and had organizational oversight over the Al-Khansaa Brigade, ISIS's all-female militant squad. A report about female ISIS militants compiled by the Jamestown Foundation matches the name and Sam's physical description of the woman (tall and big-boned, with thick glasses and a "sonorous" voice) and her family lineage and background. That same report called Umm Adam "one of the most powerful women in the [Islamic State] organization." She was one of the most fearsome and influential female ISIS militants in Raqqa, and it's likely that Sam, as the foreign-born wife of an ISIS fighter, would have run into her there.

Kneeling on the floor in her Raqqa living room, Sam knew Umm Adam was treacherous—in the Islamic State, the most dangerous people were the true believers, and this tall, black-swathed woman was one of them. But even in a situation that serious, Sam couldn't help but be a little defiant. Raising her eyes to meet Umm Adam's, Sam replied with a hint of sarcasm. "Yes, I do remember you," she said. "How are you?"

Umm Adam sensed her scorn. She took the loaded Glock and hit Sam hard with the handle, right in the middle of the forehead. Neither of them spoke after that.

A few moments later, the men who'd been searching the house came back into the living room and began speaking rapidly with Umm Adam in Arabic. Sam still had no idea what was going on. Suddenly Umm Adam pointed the gun directly into Sam's temple and asked in her cool monotone: "Where is the key?"

The key. She meant the key to Moussa's safe, where he kept all of their money, jewelry, and electronics. Sam's stomach dropped. "I can get it for you," she said. "But it also needs a security code, and I don't know what the code is." She was telling the truth, but there was no guarantee that Umm Adam would believe her.

Luckily the woman seemed satisfied with her answer. "Fine. Where is the key?" she demanded. Sam took a breath. "It's in a jar of candies on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet."

Two of the men went into the kitchen. From the living room Sam could hear them rummaging through the cabinets and smashing glass jars, searching for the key. They came back empty-handed, so Umm Adam ordered the men to drag Sam into the kitchen. Then she shoved Sam against the wall and again put the gun to her head: "Where is the key?" she growled.

Sam was getting frantic now. "It's here!" she whimpered. "I know it's here! Just let me look."

Umm Adam begrudgingly removed Sam's handcuffs and she scrambled over to the kitchen cabinets and reached on her tiptoes for a jar of candy on the back of the shelf. She handed it to one of the masked fighters, who immediately smashed it onto the ground. Among the cellophane-wrapped sweets and shards of glass scattered on the kitchen floor was the key.

With the key secured, two of the men came up behind Sam and blindfolded her, just like they had Moussa. They guided her out of the kitchen, through the living room and into the back of a waiting van to the sound of her children's terrified sobs. In the van, Nadia crawled into her lap and Michael sat next to her, clutching her arm. They drove for a while, until they pulled into some sort of garage—Sam couldn't see but she could tell from the echo the van made that they were underground. All around her men were speaking Arabic, but Sam had no idea what they were saying or why she was being taken.

When ISIS conquered Raqqa in 2014, it turned the local soccer venue into a prison where executions and beheadings were conducted publicly. The Black Stadium's maze of subterranean locker rooms was converted into jail cells and torture chambers for ISIS's many enemies. The walls of the cells were covered in graffiti in all different languages from former prisoners, who scrawled the names and death dates of those who were killed, a desperate attempt to leave a record of what had happened to them. ISIS guards repurposed gym equipment into torture devices; chains, used to suspend prisoners in stress positions, hung from the ceiling of every cell. Screams of pain and desperation tore through the darkness at all hours and blood seeped out from under cell doors. The suffering was visible, audible, palpable. The scent of rotting flesh clung to the walls.

This is where Sam says she ended up in the spring of 2016. She doesn't know for sure why she was brought there, but it's likely they discovered her escape plan and arrested Moussa, too, just in case he'd been in on it. Islamic State documents uncovered by the BBC corroborate Sam's description of her imprisonment, describing interrogations with a woman named "Umm Yusuf al Amerikiya," the name by which Sam was known in the Caliphate.

The brutality she had been subjected to by her family, her boyfriends—none of it could compare to what would happen to her at the Black Stadium. Sam was held in solitary confinement with no toilet. Her cell was so small she couldn't lie down, and twenty-four hours a day Quran passages blared from a ten-inch speaker, so loud her ears would pop. Her first six weeks, Sam was starved, given no food whatsoever. When she was close to wasting away, they began feeding her a single bowl of rice a day. Many times she was forced to use the empty bowl as a toilet, and then was not allowed to wash it before her next meal. Occasionally some soldier with a sliver of sympathy would let her out to use the real bathroom and wash her meal plate, but that was rare.

Every few days Sam would be dragged to an interrogation room, where male ISIS fighters would use physical and emotional torture to try to get her to confess to being a spy. They told her Moussa had already confessed to being a spy and that her children would be sold on the slave market because they had been born to her, a nonbeliever. Often she was stripped naked, handcuffed with her arms behind her back, and strung up by her wrists from the ceiling, left to dangle in the dark as they beat her. She knew what time it was only when she heard the call to prayer. *We're going to do to you what*

your government does to the prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, they told her. And they did: She was beaten, starved, tortured. They made her watch executions, then told her she was next. They placed electrodes on her pregnant stomach—she was more than six months along with her and Moussa's second child by then—and shocked her to see if the baby would move.

When they couldn't get Sam to confess to being an American spy, they brought in "Him." He was nameless and faceless, though later, when she learned to distinguish between the Arabic dialects, Sam came to think that maybe he'd been Egyptian. He came into the interrogation room a few weeks into her stay and touched her gently on the neck as she slumped in a chair. Then, as she struggled against his grip, he tightened his hand around her throat. "You are not so shy," he said in English.

The first time he raped her it hurt so badly she felt like she was being stabbed inside. When he was done he pulled up his black balaclava to take a drink and said, "Your night is just beginning." Then he forced her to sit naked in a cold metal chair, and it started all over again. He raped her every other night from then on.

Sam stayed in her closet-size cell for two and a half months, while Michael and Nadia stayed with Sam's neighbor. She was removed from her cell intermittently only to be interrogated, tortured, and raped. She likely would've died there, as so many people did, except for what happened next. In June 2016, the Syrian government army bombed the Black Stadium as part of an ongoing attempt to retake Raqqa. The ceiling of Sam's cell was made of metal bars, some of which collapsed during the air strike, creating a hole through which she could escape into the shaft above. She didn't even think about how badly she'd be punished if she was caught: All she cared about was getting out of that dark, airless cell. The bombing had thrown the jail into chaos, and in that chaos she managed to escape. When she reached the soccer field at the heart of the stadium, sunlight flooding in through the dust, she saw Moussa, standing there in the rubble. He was alive.

They wanted to run, but they had no idea where they should go. If they went back to their house, ISIS would find them right away. The only people they knew in Raqqa proper were fellow fighters, who would surely turn them in. Sam and Moussa huddled together inside one of the stadium's tunnels until the bombing ended and the remaining guards took them down to separate cells that hadn't been demolished.

There weren’t many holding cells still intact, so not long after the bombing Sam and Moussa were brought before a judge, who decided to release them. A woman who was also held in the Black Stadium confirmed Sam’s account of her imprisonment and told the BBC that Sam was eventually released because Moussa was a high-ranking ISIS official. Sam was blindfolded, put in a van, and dropped a half mile from her house. It had been ten weeks since she had seen her children, who were still staying with the neighbors. She was eight months pregnant.

Back at home, Sam’s body and spirit were so utterly broken that she could barely move. She was malnourished and weak; Michael had to help her walk the few steps to the bathroom. Realizing how sick she was, Moussa took her to a few doctors, but no one could tell her what was wrong. It didn’t matter, anyway: When they found out her condition stemmed from her time in prison, they inevitably refused to treat her out of fear of the ISIS security forces.

A month after she was released from the Black Stadium, Sam gave birth in an ISIS-run hospital to a baby boy. She named him Ilyas.

A few weeks after Ilyas was born, Sam started to notice abnormalities: Sometimes, when he was napping, she’d come back to rouse him and he’d be lying in his crib, shaking uncontrollably. A neighbor helped her find a doctor who was willing to see Ilyas, even though he knew that his condition was likely related to Sam’s imprisonment. The doctor gave Ilyas a checkup, and—worried that the baby had suffered brain trauma during Sam’s time at the Black Stadium—ordered neurological scans from a pediatric specialist. But a few hours after returning home, she received a call: It was the receptionist at the doctor’s office calling to say he wouldn’t be able to see Ilyas anymore. The doctor had been assassinated. That was the last time Sam took her baby for medical care in ISIS territory.

With a sick newborn, still weak from her time in prison, Sam was desperate to leave Syria, she said later. The only person she could think of to help her was the person she had hurt the most: her sister, Lori. Sam had already tried to escape and failed miserably; she knew it would be impossible to get out of Raqqa without the help of someone outside, someone who could send her money for a smuggler or get in contact with international embassies. She didn’t have internet access or a cell phone, but she would have to find a way to get in contact with Lori. Her younger sister was her only hope.

Chapter Ten

Sometimes, even after all the extremist indoctrination and the months he'd left her alone to fight on the front lines, Sam could see flickers of the man Moussa used to be. Lying on the thin mattress in their concrete house, when the gunfire abated and the kids were asleep, Sam would allow herself to slip into the memories of those first few months of their relationship. He had been so generous then, and so genuinely funny. That person was gone now, Sam knew; she saw it in the stiff way he held himself even in the privacy of their home. Since their imprisonment, Moussa had grown even more radical, constantly threatening Sam with divorce if she didn't officially convert to Islam. He even claimed that the rape and torture she'd endured at the Black Stadium were justified because she wasn't Muslim.

But occasionally the old Moussa would appear in flashes, and Sam clung to them, seizing on his rare bursts of good humor or kindness. Sometimes, she thought, he seemed like he felt guilty for dragging her all the way to Syria and for the torture she had gone through at the Black Stadium. In his softer moments she would confess to him how lonely she had become in the Raqqa house, with no one to talk to but the children. She was isolated in the truest, most complete sense, cut off from those around her by her nationality and her language and her affiliation with the extremist group that had destroyed their city. Some of her neighbors were kind to her, but the encounters she had with them were constrained by mutual suspicion. She had followed Moussa from their comfortable American life into a war zone: She might survive the air strikes, but she couldn't survive the loneliness.

One summer night in 2016, after they'd been in Raqqa for about a year, Sam says Moussa proposed a solution for both her loneliness and his desire to have more Muslim children. It would also get the family more money—ISIS policy dictated that the more Muslim-raised children you had in your home, the higher your ISIS stipend. The next day Sam methodically dressed herself in the black garments of the Islamic State, careful to cover her face, her hair, the tattoos on her wrist—"Elhassani" forever inscribed there, as if she were branded—and followed her husband to the *sabaya bazaar*, the slave market.

From its inception, ISIS had contorted Islam into something unrecognizable to most of the world's practicing Muslims, a violent ideology based on perverse interpretations of the Quran that codified torture, murder, desecration, and the rape and enslavement of non-Muslim women. While mainstream Islam centers values of faith, ritual prayer, and charity, ISIS was focused on bloody revenge upon nonbelievers. The sabaya bazaar was proof of that. As with everything within the organization, the sex trade was meticulously planned and grimly bureaucratic, with each girl, her owner, and her sale price carefully chronicled in a ledger. Young virgins with light eyes and hair fetched the highest prices; girls who were no longer virgins went for little more than $150 or a Glock pistol—whatever the fighter was willing to part with. The girls' photos and prices circulated largely via encrypted apps like Telegram and WhatsApp, but the physical market was where fighters could inspect their prospective property.

Young women and girls crowded the slave bazaar, starved and bruised and huddled together in the cold, warehouse-like room. Some had been forced to apply makeup to make them appear more attractive to potential buyers. Men laughed and joked about their sexual prowess as they entered the market and surveyed the sobbing young girls before paying an ISIS official to bring them home.

Soad was one of the girls for sale the day Sam and Moussa showed up at the market. She hailed from the western Iraqi town of Sinjar, where Kurdish families who observed a little-known religion called Yezidism lived. Yezidism is monotheistic and based on oral tradition: Its followers believe in an all-powerful earth-creating God and his seven angels, who are akin to disciples. But to the followers of ISIS's extreme theology, Yezidis were polytheists and heretics; anyone who wasn't Muslim, and especially those considered to worship more than one God, were considered *kuffar*, or nonbelievers. The Islamic State's objective in Sinjar was murky on the day its Soviet-issued tanks rolled into the villages surrounding the remote mountain in the summer of 2014, but soon it would become clearer: Its plan was to capture, enslave, and kill the Yezidi people, beginning in Sinjar, perpetrating mass genocide in the name of their God.

As ISIS forces closed in, everyone who could leave did. Families fled in cars, babies piled on the laps of children piled on the laps of women, a multigenerational nesting doll careening away from the only place they'd ever known. People who owned cars were luckier than most—others from

their village were forced to brave the mountain dark by foot. The Yezidi people, the entire population of a religion, were on the run from a jihadist militant group that wanted to kill and enslave them.

When ISIS came to Sinjar, fifteen-year-old Soad was living in Solagh, a small hamlet in the eastern part of the district. Her family had lived there for centuries; her parents tended a small farm and she and her three sisters and four brothers attended the local school. Soad was stubborn, and, back then, an inextinguishable light seemed to flicker in her dark brown eyes, as if she was always just about to laugh. She loved children and wanted to be a teacher; she wanted to marry a nice Yezidi boy and have a large family. But in August 2014, just as Moussa's interest in jihad was deepening and he'd begun to mull a move abroad, word began spreading between the families in Solagh that ISIS would soon overrun the village. By the time the news reached Soad's family, it was too late: In a matter of days, her family was captured by ISIS and separated. Soad, her mother, her sisters, and her younger brother were rounded up and sent to wait in a school in nearby Tal Afar. Her father and older brothers were taken somewhere else; where, she never found out. She would never see them again.

The women and children of Soad's family waited for three days at the school before being transferred in buses to Badush prison, a Saddam Hussein–era military complex outside of Mosul that just two months earlier had been the site of a vicious massacre where ISIS executed 670 Shia prisoners. At the prison, the militants divided the women and children into two groups: those considered young or attractive enough to be sold as sex slaves—and those who were not. ISIS had long advertised the availability of female sex slaves to recruit fighters. Soad and her sisters would become some of them.

Soad's mother, Guri, wore the all-white outfit of married Yezidi women, which signaled that she was both older and not a virgin. She was separated from her daughters and her young son, who were grouped together. Guri's captors took her to a room with a small window at the top. Soad and her sisters had not yet lost their nerve; their desperation made them brave. The night they were taken from their mother, they sneaked out of their room and helped her escape through the window of her makeshift holding cell. They took her to their room and redressed her in one of the spare outfits they'd brought with them, girlish clothes that would less easily betray her age. That night they saved their mother from being buried in a mass grave.

Soad and her family stayed in that prison outside Mosul for nine days before they were transferred to a school in Tal Afar. They had no communication with the outside world and no idea what had happened to their other family members, or what was about to happen to them. ISIS fighters came and went, collecting a detailed registry of every girl's name, age, hometown, marriage status, and whether she had any children. They surveyed the stock of virgin brides and occasionally selected one to sell to fighters in Syria. When the family was moved once again to another school outside Tal Afar, Soad's older sister Samia was taken away and sold to an ISIS fighter who had seen her stepping off the bus in the predawn.

After Samia disappeared, their mother devised a plan: To make herself less attractive to any men who might want to buy her, Soad would pretend she had had a psychotic break, and her other sisters would pretend they were young mothers of the orphaned children, so the fighters would think they weren't virgins. It didn't work. A week into their captivity in the new school, a fighter named Abu Yakim entered the gymnasium and spotted Soad from across the room. She was in her first year of high school, with a slim build and square jaw. He decided on the spot he had to own her.

Abu Yakim was from Kirkuk, and he spoke the Kurdish dialect Sorani, which betrayed some Kurdish roots. With a thick, hairy finger he pointed at Soad and an aunt who was also being held captive and declared that he and his friend wanted them both. The girls were driven to his home nearby, shoved into the bathroom, and ordered to bathe themselves. Soad knew immediately what that meant, and she refused, even after he started to beat her. Abu Yakim dragged her into the bathroom, locked her in the dark, and told her he wouldn't let her out until she had washed herself. Soad had no choice but to give in.

Once she was clean, Abu Yakim led her to a bedroom and used a cloth to tie her wrists together. She tried to struggle against the knot but she was weak and malnourished and exhausted. To her he seemed enormous, as if he possessed superhuman strength, as if he wasn't a man at all but a creature stitched together from her darkest fears.

Before Abu Yakim raped her he prayed, falling to his knees to thank Allah for the virgin before him. Soad lay very still, as if he might forget she was there. When he was done he rose to his feet and approached the bed. Soad's mind went dark, but she clung to the facts she knew—his name, his

birthplace—and repeated them soundlessly, hoping that if she made it out alive she could tell what had happened to her.

After he finished raping her, Abu Yakim prayed again as Soad lay motionless on the bed cushion, her mind spinning. He put his face close to hers and said, with a faux sweetness: “Just do what I say, and I won’t sell you. Be good to me, and I will be good to you.”

It was September 2014 and Soad was fifteen years old. For the next three years she was enslaved, passed between ISIS fighters from Iraq and Syria and Saudi Arabia until she landed in that market in Raqqa. Each time she was sold, Soad did her best to remember her new captor, permanently inscribing the details of the men and what they had done to her on a register in her mind, a testimony to their unique capacities for cruelty. Sam and Lori had these mental lists, too, as many women do, an ever-growing account of the men who had wronged them: George. Robert. Moussa. Yassine. Perhaps when Sam saw Soad in the market in Raqqa that day, that’s what drew her to the teenage girl before her, the connective thread of shame and grief and powerlessness that bonded them as women.

At the market, Moussa approached Abu Abdullah al-Jazwari, an ISIS bureaucrat who ran the sex trade, and said he was interested in purchasing a slave. Abu Abdullah led him and Sam to a small anteroom with low-slung couches, a thin curtain cordoning off the space from the larger bazaar. Potential buyers used the viewing room to closely inspect their prospective property. Often, they would make the girls disrobe and spin around, and ask them invasive questions to determine their sexual history, such as when they had last menstruated.

Sam and Moussa sat on the couches as a bazaar worker paraded a young woman in front of them: Soad, wearing a dress that hung off her body, the wine-colored velvet garish against her gray, papery skin. At first she refused to meet Sam’s gaze, keeping her dull eyes glued to the dirt floor. Her visible nervousness irritated Sam, or perhaps the idea that this young woman was afraid of *her* just made Sam feel guilty. Even here, in the slave market, she wanted to be liked.

Moussa took one look at Soad’s slightness and pallor and declared he wasn’t interested. But according to both Sam and Soad, Sam didn’t want to leave the market without Soad; she begged Moussa to let them talk for a moment.

Sam did not speak Arabic—Soad could tell she was American by her English—so Moussa translated.

"Please sit," Sam said, and Moussa gestured to the floor. Soad lowered herself nervously to the ground and tucked her legs beneath her, refusing to raise her gaze. "What's your name?" Moussa asked. "Soad," she answered, barely audible.

From behind the curtain Abu Abdullah barked at Soad to show the couple her tattoos. When she had first been separated from her sister Samia in the school in Tal Afar, Soad used a needle, soil, and some milk to crudely scribble her sister's name onto the inside of her wrist. On the fleshy part of her arm, before they'd been separated, her mother had also tattooed a list of her other family members so that, no matter where she ended up, she would never forget them. ISIS fighters despised Soad's tattoos—they considered them *haram*—and that meant Soad typically sold for a lower price. But when Sam saw the tattoos, she smiled. Slowly she pulled up the black sleeve of her *abaya* and held out her wrist: On the inside was a tattoo of a red star. Soad looked up at her, stunned. "I have tattoos, too," Sam said.

Sam looked over at Moussa, who still seemed uninterested in Soad. "Please, Moussa," she begged. "I'll pay for her using my jewelry." Sam had managed to hold on to a couple of gold bracelets from the US, stored in their new safe at home, that were worth about $10,000. Moussa begrudgingly agreed.

Recounting this event in her diary a year later, Sam wrote that she loved Soad from the moment their eyes met. Sam seemed to frame the entry about Sabaya Bazaar to make herself appear as innocent as possible—like she was rescuing Soad, as opposed to trafficking her. But Soad confirms the details of her first meeting with Sam—her kindness, the kinship they both felt when sharing their tattoos—and says she felt safe with her. It's possible that Sam willingly went along with Moussa's plan to join ISIS but changed her mind at some point—in Hong Kong, at the border, in Raqqa, when she was taken to the Black Stadium. It's possible, too, that she intended to treat Soad well, while nevertheless committing the crime of human trafficking.

Over the next few weeks, Sam worked hard to ingratiate herself to the young and terrified teenager whom she had purchased at the sex slave market. Sam put Soad in her own room with a TV, stocked with Disney DVDs Moussa had bought for the kids on the black market. Just like when

she went through with the gang initiation in Little Rock so her new friends would like her, here she was, in Syria, trying to endear herself to the teenage girl she had purchased as a slave.

Ten days after Soad moved in with them, Moussa returned home with another enslaved Yezidi girl, a fourteen-year-old named Bahar who was also from the Sinjar region. Bahar and Soad became friends, making trips to the market together and watching *The Little Mermaid* on Soad's tiny TV. A few months later, Moussa purchased a seven-year-old boy named Ayham who bonded with Michael. Ayham's presence in his home meant Moussa would get a larger stipend from the ISIS government; many young Yezidi boys like Ayham had been forced to convert to Islam and were used on the front lines as human shields and as props in ISIS propaganda videos. Ayham was small and dark-haired and his ears stuck out of the sides of his head. He had a habit of standing with his hands stuffed into his pockets, which made him look like an adult man who had shrunk in the wash. Ayham had been kidnapped by ISIS in 2014 from his hometown of Tal Banat when he was just four years old, and he'd spent the last two years being bought and sold by ISIS fighters who used him to increase their government stipends, indoctrinated by propaganda, and forced to renounce his religion. When Moussa was away guarding Raqqa from Western-backed coalitions as a sniper, Sam allowed Ayham, Soad, and Bahar to perform their religious rituals, like fasting and celebrating Yezidi New Year. She had them recite the names of their family members so they wouldn't forget them and taught them helpful English phrases, like "Hello, how are you? My name is Ayham and I want to get out of here." At night, she sang "You Are My Sunshine," to Ayham and her younger children as they fell asleep.

Most days Sam, Soad, and Bahar would take the children shopping or to the nearby park. When it was hot, they went swimming in the Euphrates. By that point, satellite television had been banned and home internet wasn't allowed—ISIS enforced this rule by driving around the city with vans that tracked satellite signals—but Sam got a flash drive of kids' TV shows from a neighbor, and she allowed them all to watch cartoons when Moussa wasn't home. The kids busied themselves by kicking around a soccer ball or playing marbles. A few months earlier, Moussa had bought Sam a horse, so sometimes she and the girls would take it over to the neighbors' houses to entertain their children.

According to Soad, Sam taught her and Bahar how to drive and how to sew. She introduced them to new foods that quickly became their favorites—macaroni and cheese, lasagna, chicken breast with potatoes—and the girls taught her how to make Kurdish dishes like kofta and Iraqi black tea. Though local Syrian families lined up for meager rations of soup and bread, before the Raqqa siege the families of ISIS fighters ate relatively well. Sam told the girls when the war was finished she would help them move to the US and together they could open an Iraqi restaurant—a promise she must have known she couldn't possibly fulfill.

Much like when Richard would return from the road when Sam was a child, the tenor of the house in Raqqa changed completely when Moussa was home. Moussa used a garden hose to beat Sam until she bled. He beat her even when she became pregnant again after giving birth to Ilyas, sometimes for no reason at all.

Moussa had purchased Bahar and Soad as his sex slaves so that they could eventually bear his Muslim children, once they'd gotten stronger; he'd thought that would make Sam jealous, giving him another avenue of control. Instead, the three women became unified by their hatred of him, forming a bond that strengthened and emboldened them. Moussa felt like an enemy in his own home, and he would frequently take it out on Bahar and Soad, spitting on them, hitting, and cursing at them.

As Soad gained weight and grew bolder under Sam's guidance, Moussa became interested in her in a way he hadn't been before. One night in bed he turned toward Sam as she was falling asleep and said: "You have to give me Soad."

Sam says she refused. She wept. She bargained. She even offered to convert. But Moussa would hear none of it. That night he raped Soad; the next he raped Bahar.

Sam and Moussa's daughter, Nadia, was only four, too young to fully understand all the changes in her environment or the way her mother's choices would mark her life. But nine-year-old Michael's experience was different. To the Islamic State, Michael was a valuable propaganda tool in the group's quest for global jihad. The fact that an American family had traveled to Syria to join the fight was proof that the movement was truly a global phenomenon; ISIS considered this perception essential to its recruiting efforts.

ISIS used children as young as six as soldiers and human shields, or as blood donors for fighters who required transfusions. One particularly disturbing ISIS video shows a toddler screaming *Allahu Akbar* as he beheads a teddy bear with a long blade. Some parents had little choice in the matter; once a city was overtaken by ISIS, its children became *Cubs of the Caliphate*, regardless of their families' feelings about the Islamic State.

Moussa was insistent that his stepson, Michael (whose name he changed to the Arabic "Yusuf"), and eight-year-old Ayham follow the strict rules of the terrorist group's brand of Islam. He and Ayham were required to attend classes at the mosque with other boys their age, where they were taught Quran verses, battle songs, and the importance of jihad. The boys also learned how to operate Soviet-issued automatic weapons, how to assemble bombs, and how to complete a successful suicide mission while guaranteeing the maximum number of casualties.

Moussa was a sniper on the front lines, but Abdelhadi worked in ISIS's media center producing propaganda videos and insisted that Michael and Ayham appear in one. A year into her time in Syria, ISIS soldiers showed up at Sam's home and demanded—against her protestations—that the boys shoot the video. The resulting seven-minute film is slickly produced, presenting Raqqa not as the shell of a city it had by then become, but as an Islamic utopia teeming with fierce warriors hell-bent on destroying the West. Michael appears less than a minute in, his head covered in a black scarf, hunched over a rifle while a sniper teaches him how to shoot. "My name is Yusuf and I'm ten years old," he says in Arabic-accented English, staring straight into the camera. He speaks stiffly, obviously reading off a script, with a pained expression on his face.

"My message is to Trump, the puppet of the Jews," Michael says in one of the final scenes—a simultaneously absurd and chilling proclamation in his child's voice. "Allah has promised us victory and he's promised you defeat. This battle is not going to end in Raqqa or Mosul. It's going to end in your lands. By the will of Allah we will have victory." The video was meant to amplify one of ISIS's core messages—that the group was a global phenomenon, not just one in Iraq and Syria. *We are coming for your children,* it telegraphed to the West.

Though Michael was forced to claim in the propaganda video that "the fighting has just begun," in reality, the battle in Raqqa was coming to a close. By February 2017, coalition-backed Syrian forces were closing in,

and Moussa was wounded in an air strike after a piece of shrapnel struck him in the back. The war was intensifying now—ISIS was clearly losing ground—and Sam began to fear that she and the kids really would die there.

Moussa was hospitalized after the air strike, and when Sam went to visit him, he was heavily medicated, incoherent. Because the shrapnel had hit near his heart, the doctors did not believe that Moussa would live much longer. Even though she hated and feared him for everything he had done to her, Sam was terrified of what would happen if Moussa died. The women of ISIS did not remain widows for long; the rules demanded that they remarry quickly and continue to churn out children to populate the Caliphate. In this way, the ISIS wives became dependent on the jihadi network itself for sustenance, as opposed to their husbands, who could be killed at any time and replaced with a new militant. Would Sam be forced to wed Moussa's brother Abdelhadi, who was crueler and more devout, and who would no doubt treat Sam with even more callousness than Moussa had? Even worse would be if she had to marry a stranger, a foreign ISIS fighter whose moods she could not read or predict or learn to manipulate. Sam still didn't speak Arabic and she feared the religious zeal displayed by some of the foreign fighters. Sitting beside Moussa, motionless in his hospital bed, Sam knew she couldn't wait around any longer: She had to try again to get out, one more time. She had to contact her sister.

A few nights later, with Moussa medicated into unconsciousness, Sam found a way. Later, she claimed she used a computer she found in an office at the hospital to send an email to Lori. It was February 4, 2017, and she hadn't been able to contact her sister since arriving in Raqqa because it was difficult to access the internet. Sam had spent her whole life rebuffing Lori's attempts at rescue, refusing to validate her martyr complex, but she knew she would not get out of Raqqa without her sister's help. She had to tell her where she was.

"I really hope you can help me," Sam wrote to her sister. "I am so lucky, you have no idea how lucky I am to have a little access to internet FINALLY! I don't know how long this will last. I have to be forward with you because I don't have a lot of time, this could be my last time online, I really don't know." She briefly explained that Moussa had tricked her and the children into crossing over into Syria, and how their life in Raqqa had become increasingly untenable. She said Moussa was dying and she was panicked about what would happen next. Since Moussa's injury, Abdelhadi

had mentioned the option of paying a smuggler named Florian to get her and the children out, but she had no idea if that would be possible. Still, she told Lori that she would try to convince Abdelhadi to talk to Florian, and to keep an eye out for any WhatsApp messages from him, just in case. She attached evidence she thought would convince her family to send the money: upsetting, violent videos she'd filmed of Michael. While Moussa was unconscious, she'd sent the videos to herself from his phone. Sam signed off with something close to an incantation: "I love you, I miss you, I love you, I miss you, I love you, I miss you!" All she could do now was wait.

Around lunchtime on Saturday, February 4, 2017, Lori was at home in her apartment in South Bend, suffering from mold poisoning. The day before, she'd been squatting beneath her kitchen sink trying to fix a leak when her hand went through the wall, unleashing an army of black mold spores that caused an allergic reaction.

Lori had lost her voice and couldn't stop coughing. Her skull felt like a steel drum that her brain was beating against. She settled into her Mama Bear chair, an antique floral armchair with a matching ottoman, to try to relax. She was thumbing at her phone, flicking through emails, when she saw one from Sam. It was a response to the message Lori had sent her a week earlier, when she told Sam she knew she was in trouble and asked how she could help. Lori opened Sam's email. The trouble Sam was in was far beyond anything she could have imagined.

"Please tell Mom and Dad and anyone that can help me and the kids, that Moussa brought me and the kids illegally to Syria," Sam's email read. "Out of all places in Syria, he chose Raqqa. So, we have been 'living' here for almost 2 years. Please don't be angry with me, please tell everyone I will explain everything later when I have time. Right now is the only time I can do this, the only time I am free is now."

Lori shot up out of the chair. She forgot about the mold and the breathing trouble and the headache, and began to pace around the apartment, reading the rest of the email as she did:

> I really hope you can help me… I love you so much and I am so sorry for any way I may have ever hurt you, and please forgive me. Please pray for us. Please tell everyone to forgive

me for anything I have done. Please ask Mom and Dad to forgive me, every day I am being punished for my sins."

Of everything about Sam's email—the frantic apologies, the urgent tone with which she pleaded for rescue—it was the videos that upset Lori the most. There were two attached to the email, and alone in her South Bend apartment with the curtains drawn to block out the midday sun, Lori cautiously clicked to watch.

The first was a video of Michael. He's sitting cross-legged in a concrete-walled room, perched atop some thin cushions. His head is wrapped in a black-and-white checkered scarf and he's staring intently at an AK-47 lying on the floor in front of him. Behind him, on one of the cushions, lies a second rifle with a large scope.

Then Moussa's deep baritone resounds offscreen; Lori recognized it immediately. It was the voice of her ex-husband's brother, her children's uncle, the man who had wreaked so much havoc on her life over the last several years.

"If you can do this, without a single mistake, take apart this loaded AK in less than a minute, and put it back together in less than a minute, loaded and ready to fire," he instructs Michael in English, "I'm gonna get you your own explosive belt. It's not going to be like last time; this explosive belt is going to be yours *all* the time. You can go to bed with it, you can go to the bathroom with it, no one takes it from you, okay?"

"Okay," Michael repeats, wringing his hands nervously and staring, presumably, at Moussa. A third person in the room, off-camera, is filming. *Could it be Sam?* Lori wondered.

"*Yella*, go ahead," Moussa says next. Michael takes a deep breath and begins to recite an ISIS chant. The camera shakes as it zooms in on Michael's face. When he finishes the chant, Moussa declares *"Jayeed"*—"good"—and instructs him to take apart the AK. "OK," Michael responds in Arabic, and Moussa starts the clock. Then, Lori's ten-year-old nephew begins to expertly disassemble the assault rifle with his tiny hands.

"Careful, it might be loaded," Moussa warns, as Michael ejects the magazine. In less than twenty seconds he splits the gun into its constituent parts and lays them out neatly on the floor. Then he begins to put it back together—"Like a man!" Moussa barks—and Michael swiftly reassembles the weapon, loads it, and lays it on the ground.

"*Khalas,* it's ready to shoot," Moussa declares. "*Yella,* let me go get you your explosive belt, okay?"

"Thank you," Michael says in Arabic.

"Say *alhamdulillah [praise be to God],*" Moussa instructs. Michael repeats. "You need to go pray two *rakats,* okay?" Moussa says. Michael nods, and the video cuts off.

Lori's mouth felt like sandpaper. She clicked open the second video. In this one Michael is sitting cross-legged in a brown robe on the tile floor of a house, his head wrapped in a camouflage print scarf. A TV above a low-slung couch plays video of an ISIS execution. Michael sits patiently with a black pouch in front of him, waiting for directions. Off-camera, Moussa's voice booms: "OK, show me what you got there," he says in English, and Michael starts to unzip the pouch.

"Is that your new toy?" Moussa asks.

"Yes, it is," Michael says cheerily. "It's my new toy."

Michael deftly pulls the orange device, about the length and width of a book, out of its black casing, and points to some pieces of metal taped to the top. He holds it up. "Seven hundred of these steel balls," he says, pointing to each part. "Three kilos of TNT. Two metal plates. And a C4 cortex fuse."

"What is missing?" Moussa quizzes him.

Michael looks up. "The detonator."

Oh my god, Lori realized, panic rising in her throat. *It's an explosive belt.*

Then Moussa hands him two grenades, and Michael screws the lugs off, so the fuses could be used as detonators.

"Choose," he says. "One is six seconds, Russian, and one is five seconds, American. Which one do you want?"

Michael looks up for a moment, as if trying to decide, then reaches for one of the grenades. "The six-second Russian detonator," he says.

As she watched from South Bend, Lori choked back tears; her sweet nephew had chosen the detonator that would allow him to live one second longer.

Next Moussa tosses a roll of yellow tape onto the floor in front of Michael. "Okay, let's put it on," he says. As Michael tapes the detonator to the explosives, Moussa asks, "What do you do if you hear a helicopter and the American pigs come down to kidnap you and your mom? What are you gonna do?"

Michael looks up. “I’m going to put on my belt, I’m going to hide it under my shirt. I’m going to walk out and say, ‘Come save me, come save me. My name is Michael. I’m American! Come save me, come save me.’ And as soon as the helicopter comes I’m gonna run and I’m gonna pull my pin.”

“You have to wait until they get really close,” Moussa corrects him.

“So as soon as the helicopter comes down, I pull my pin, and I say, *Lā ʾIlāha ʾIllā Allah, Muḥammadun Rasūl Allah*,” reciting the *Shahada*, the Islamic profession of faith. “*Allahu Akhbar.*

“Then I pull the pin, and I open my eyes, and I’m in *jannah*,” he declares, using the Arabic word for “paradise.” “*Inshallah* God will accept me.” Then the clip cuts off.

Lori started to cry. She could barely stomach it. The videos laid bare the heinous violence of Michael’s life, the sheer control Moussa had over him and the rest of the family, and the fact that he was being groomed and trained to kill on behalf of the Islamic State. It was so cruel, so deeply unfair. She hated that instead of playing with their cousins or doing art projects or going to the park, Sam’s kids were in a war zone, with munitions for toys.

Lori watched the videos again, checking for details she might have missed. She put her phone down, her mind reeling. She wished it was some sort of prank, but she knew even Sam, a top-notch fabricator, couldn’t concoct this. And Michael was right there, in pixels on her screen. Still, she wanted some sort of proof that it was really Sam who had emailed her, and not Moussa trying to trick her, or some sick hacker who’d gotten access to her account. Lori decided to recount a memory the two of them shared but tweak some of the important details: If it really was Sam, she and only she would know which details were correct.

“Remember when you had the car accident and I knew you were hurt?” Lori emailed her, after confirming that she would help in whatever way she could. “I ran outside and found you covered in blood with Juan?”

Sam replied later that day. “I know which accident you are talking about however Juan wasn’t there and it was a four wheeler. I have scars from barbed wire outside the house on Wharton.”

It was Sam.

Chapter Eleven

Lori knew Sam well, perhaps better than anybody else knew her. To her it seemed unlikely that Sam had ended up in Syria by mistake. And even though Lori knew firsthand how controlling and violent the Elhassani brothers could be, she doubted Moussa could make her strong-willed older sister do much of anything, let alone join a foreign terrorist organization. Still, she felt obligated to at least try to help her—even if when Sam got back to the States she would likely face the full brunt of US law enforcement. She also had Sam's kids to think of: Michael, assembling weapons with his child's hands, and Nadia, still only four.

So when Lori received Sam's email, she started calling every agency she could think of that might help her bring her sister home. First she dialed Homeland Security. Her voice was so raspy and quiet from the mold that the people on the other end could barely hear her, and she had to beg them to stay on the line. She called the State Department. The FBI. She sent the videos to Michael's father, Juan, who was so shaken by what he saw that he ended up taking a leave of absence from work. Then Lori called her parents. When her mother answered, Lori collapsed into heaving sobs, her breathing so belabored by the mold and the crying that she could barely choke out the words. "Sam is in Syria," she wailed into the phone. "But I'm going to get her back."

Both Juan and her parents seemed as shocked by the news as she was, but Lori later found out that the FBI had actually told both Richard and Juan that Sam was in Syria back in 2016. They'd known where Sam was for more than a year but had never told Lori—out of deference for the FBI's instructions—and still didn't, even as she kept them both updated on the search for her missing sister. When she called them after receiving Sam's email, they both played dumb.

When Lori finally got through to the Department of Homeland Security that evening, they set up a satellite call so she could talk to US military personnel on the ground in Syria. The officer told Lori not to worry—she'd have a team try to find out more information about Sam's whereabouts over the weekend and get back in touch on Monday.

But Lori couldn't sit around all weekend, waiting for the US Army to respond to her at their earliest convenience. She forwarded Sam's email to

every government email address she could find: the White House, the State Department. “We are sorry for her situation, but If she is in Syria, we will not be able to get her out of there,” the State Department’s American Citizen Services branch in Amman responded. After some extensive Googling, Lori decided to reach out to a UK-based criminal defense attorney who specialized in terrorism law, but he told Lori he couldn’t represent Sam because he was already juggling so many cases.

The next day, Lori was busy sending out requests to various NGOs for help with Sam’s case when she heard a knock at the door. When she opened it, two clean-cut white men introduced themselves as federal agents. Max was short and handsome, with dark hair and a face like a young Tom Cruise. His partner Bill was tall, blond, and cornfed. They asked Lori if they could come inside and talk.

The two men sat on Lori’s couch and she perched across from them on her Mama Bear chair. “We’re here about your sister,” they said. They wanted to know everything Lori knew about Sam and her whereabouts. Lori agreed, and forwarded them the email Sam had sent her. She downloaded the videos of Michael to a thumb drive and handed that over, too, and then she told the agents all that she knew about what Sam had been up to before she landed in Syria. The two men seemed surprised by the information—even though Sam had been working as a confidential human informant for an FBI agent in Elkhart when she disappeared into Syria, the agents acted as if they had no idea she’d ended up there. “How could someone working as an FBI informant join a terrorist organization without them knowing?” Lori thought. This was the US government: Shouldn’t they know more about Sam and her whereabouts than she did? Or maybe they knew way more than she could imagine, and simply refused to tell her.

Max became Lori’s main contact at the FBI, and he made her a key source in the agency’s hunt for Sam. She began funneling any information she could glean from Sam or the Elhassani family back to him. At the end of her frantic email, Sam had asked Lori to watch out for messages from a man named Florian Mueller, whom Sam said could smuggle her and the kids out of Raqqa. “Please make him feel special so he doesn’t give up on me,” Sam begged. Max agreed that Lori should try to talk to Florian; he was their only direct link to Sam. She would send any and all communications with Florian to the FBI, and in turn they would help her craft her responses.

On February 9, 2017, five days after Lori first received Sam's email and a day after meeting with Max and Bill, a phone number with a Syrian country code sent Lori a message on Telegram, an encrypted messenger app popular with jihadists and others. The account had a profile photo of a dark-haired, bearded man with his arms crossed at his chest. This was "Florian."

"*Salamwaalaykum*," he said in a voice message. "Sorry for my English. My English is not good because I didn't learn English in school. I learn by myself.

"I have contact to Slovakia government," he then wrote to her, according to message transcripts. "They are so corrupt. I can get passports for [Sam and the kids] and get them safely out so nobody knows. And after she have her passport and start in Slovakia and make some money she can come back and nobody knows anything." The plan, he said, was to smuggle Sam from Syria to Turkey, and then use the fake documents to get her to Slovakia.

Lori was nervous and immediately suspicious. She had no idea how to interact with someone like Florian. How could she even be sure this supposed smuggler really knew Sam? How could she possibly trust him?

"Are the kids okay?" she responded.

"Yes they booth [*sic*] of them are good," he said, and continued on his tirade. "If the American government know where she is now, she will have problems for the rest of her life," he said. "She scare much if the USA government know something." Lori wanted to help Sam escape Syria and face her fate in the US, but she didn't want to help her become an international fugitive.

"I have to go," he finished. "I will write you."

"I need her to be safe and let me take care of her," Lori pleaded, then added, "Okay thank you so much, I am here day and night."

"Yes after she is out u can start a good new life in Europe," Florian replied. "But just follow my orders and don't make any mistakes. Plzzz."

"Do it for sam [Nadia] and [Michael]…" he added.

Tomorrow, Florian told Lori, he would go visit Sam to check in on her while Moussa was sleeping.

"I understand," Lori replied. "Please tell me how she is. Is she eating? Is she healthy?

"Also, I can read Arabic if that's easier," she added, knowing she could quickly translate anything Florian said using Google.

“She is happy and sometimes depressiv [*sic*],” Florian replied. Then he said, “I am not Arabic, but *mashallah*,” indicating he was impressed with Lori’s ability to read the language.

The tone of the conversation shifted then; Florian went off-topic and became suddenly flirty. “U are really nice,” he said.

“You’re funny,” she replied.

“No is not a joke,” Florian said. “Are u single? Sorry for the question.”

Yuck, Lori thought. But Sam had told her to be nice to Florian, and she knew she had to be. He was Lori’s only link to her sister, her only hope of ever saving Sam from Syria. If he wanted to flirt, she would have to flirt.

Even though she was with Hariss, Lori told him she was single, just to keep him texting.

“How can be a woman like u single?” he asked.

Lori thought about how badly things with Yassine had ended.

“Men here are disloyal,” she responded.

“I am single because here is not a woman like u,” Florian replied. “I mean from beauty. I don’t know how u are from inside. But Sam trust me very much. I think I am loyal. If I trust u i will send u a pic [of] me.”

Lori shuddered. *This* was the guy who was supposed to get Sam safely out of a war-torn country run by suicidal jihadists? *This* guy, who wanted to send her a selfie thirty minutes into talking?

“Just wait until you do trust me,” she responded, eager to not provoke him into any further flirting. “I am safe here and you are not, so don’t be impulsive. I will see you when you know how much I care for my sister.”

Florian agreed, and then said he had to go; his internet was shutting off. He signed off with a promise to send Lori news of Sam when he saw her the next day.

Around the same time the next day—2:45 p.m. in South Bend, 10:45 p.m. in Raqqa—Florian again sent Lori a Telegram message. First he asked if she’d shown any of the videos Sam had sent to her parents or to Michael’s father, Juan. Lori said she hadn’t sent the video to Juan, but that she’d “let him watch” it. Florian was asking because he claimed to have come across some information, independently of Sam, that the US government knew “everything.” “It’s a big problem,” he said. “I don’t really know what to do.”

“If what you are saying is true, why are you still talking to me?” Lori asked, after running what he’d said by Max.

“[I’m not] scared,” Florian replied. “Nobody knows my face.”

“What I mean is, what can I do to make a difference? What do you want from me?” Lori responded.

“I don’t want anything from u,” he said. “Just be loyal and help your sister. And [tell] me the [truth]. Who contact[ed] the government?”

Lori adamantly denied she’d reached out to the government, even though she was in regular contact with them. She had no time to spare. Ever since receiving Sam’s email, she’d been reading every English-language source she could find about what was happening on the ground in Syria. Before Sam absconded there, Lori could barely point Syria out on a map, but now it felt like she was an expert. In Raqqa, the situation was growing increasingly dire; the Syrian Democratic Forces had begun a new phase of Operation Wrath of Euphrates a few months earlier, the third of a five-part plan to defeat ISIS in Raqqa. The SDF was starting to encircle Raqqa, intending to cut it off entirely from the surrounding countryside before launching an all-out offensive on the fighters still trapped there. If Sam was going to get out before the city was blockaded entirely, it had to be now, or else—from what Lori had been reading—she could die in the siege that would follow. Florian said that to help Sam, what Lori really needed to do was send money. If she could send nearly $25,000, he said, that would be enough for him to get fake documents and pay the smugglers willing to take them to Slovakia.

“How long until invasion?” Lori asked. “I need to know how much time I have to get this together.” She was skeptical about all of it. How would she come up with that kind of money, and how was she supposed to get it to Syria? Florian claimed that she’d have to fly the money to Germany and give it to a Syrian man there, who would somehow get it to Sam. But even if the money did arrive in Raqqa, would it really help Sam? How did she know this guy wasn’t just trying to extort her?

Lori peppered Florian with questions. “If the invasion happens, how will that affect this deal?” He didn’t know. “What promise can you give that she won’t be kidnapped after I give the money?” Only Allah could promise such a thing. “What about Moussa? Is he with IS?” Yes, he is fighting for ISIS, but he’s injured now, so it’s the perfect time for Sam to escape. “Did he bring Sam there against her will?” Florian didn’t know but said he could ask them. “No, don’t,” Lori replied. “It will stress her.”

The next day, Florian reached out to Lori again on Telegram. He said he had been away, out of Raqqa, but that Sam was still in the city and doing okay. “Can you get me in contact with Sam?” Lori asked, but Florian insisted she had no access to the internet, and it was too dangerous for her to travel outside of the city. He said that he would have Sam record a voice message for Lori. But before sending him such a large sum of money, Lori wanted more.

“No picture?” Lori asked. “A picture of her and the kids? You can send from your phone if you want. I just need to see them.”

Florian claimed he never saw Sam without *niqab*, but that he would try to get a photo of the children to send to Lori.

Two days later, Florian delivered on his promise, but from a new phone number—one with an Austrian country code. First he sent a blurry photo of Michael, looking thin but smiling wide, wearing a white Islamic robe and with his head wrapped in a black turban. The photo is low-quality, but in it he holds a sign, dated February 13, 2017. “I love you Lori,” it says. “Happy Valentine’s Day.” Sam’s daughter Nadia wasn’t in the photo, Florian claimed, because she had been asleep when it was taken.

When Lori saw the photo, saw how small Michael was, an uncapped rage coursed through her body. She thought about Cassidy and Mac, so close in age to Nadia and Michael; while Lori took her kids to playgrounds and the skating rink, Nadia and Michael were in a war zone dodging explosions and ravaged by hunger. She felt a renewed motivation to rescue Sam—if only for Michael and Nadia, whose only crime was being born to a mother who couldn’t protect them.

The photo of Michael was accompanied by a voice message from Sam. Lori clicked play, and the sound of her sister’s voice flooded out through her phone. She hadn’t heard that voice in more than two years.

“Hi Lori, thank you for your help,” Sam said. “Today is the 13th of February 2017. I hope the picture from Michael is okay for you. The situation is getting worse day by day and I hope you’ll be able to get things done fast. I love you and I’m so lucky to have you as a sister. Thank you so much for everything.”

Sam sounded tired and distressed. It was strange for Lori to hear her older sister—always so stubborn and brash—so chastened, her fate entirely out of her hands.

After Florian sent Lori the “proof of life” materials, his nagging for the large sum of money grew more insistent over the following weeks. Lori said she was attempting to get the money together, but that it was difficult; the sum he wanted was equivalent to half her annual salary. She asked Florian why Sam and Moussa didn’t contact Moussa’s older brother Abdelillah, who lived in California and ran a successful business. Lori thought that perhaps the Elhassani family had known about Moussa’s plans to join ISIS, though court records for Abdelillah’s later immigration hearing show that, though they were suspicious, the family didn’t know for sure where Moussa and Sam had ended up.

“I don’t know,” Florian said. “Maybe they will. But [Sam] is scared [Abdelillah] will contact Abdelhadi. He is here, too.”

Lori drew a sharp breath. Moussa’s older brother was also in Raqqa with him and Sam? “Wtf?!?” she responded. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. This is the biggest problem,” Florian said. “They come here all together.”

“Abdelhadi—Sam hates him,” Florian added.

Lori was shaken up. She’d met Abdelhadi several times during her tumultuous marriage with Yassine, when he would visit from North Dakota and he and Moussa would watch lectures in Arabic together. She knew he was much more pious and conservative than his brothers, and that they often watched videos about Islam, but she didn’t know the extent to which Abdelhadi had been radicalized, and hadn’t understood the videos had an extremist tenor. She certainly never thought he would do something like this.

Meanwhile, Florian’s insistent messaging was starting to take a toll. Lori always slept with her phone on loud, so she could respond to him as soon as he reached out. Somehow she was still expected to live her regular life, going to work and reading books to her kids and taking her dogs to the dog park, even though she had this intense secret that she couldn’t share with anyone. It made her feel even more isolated from the world around her than she already did. Lori was splitting custody with Yassine and had gotten a full-time gig as a technician at Comcast. She still loved experimenting with new hair colors, constantly changing her hair from fiery reds to chocolate-browns, and she managed her anxiety by crocheting costumes and clothes for the kids. If you’d been her Facebook friend at the time, you’d have had no idea Lori was suffering through a very real family crisis:

For her friends she maintained a facade of perfect calm, continuing to post anti-Trump memes and dog pictures.

As the days crawled on, Florian's Telegram messages grew flirtier and less focused on the actual task at hand: saving Sam from ISIS. Lori knew that she would need to be friendly—she occasionally obliged his requests for selfies even though it made her uncomfortable, and she entertained off-topic conversations about things like cooking and relationships—but she was growing impatient with his lack of seriousness about the mission. Not only that, but the smuggling sum he'd requested ballooned: At first it was $25,000, but soon it grew to $50,000, then $100,000—huge sums of money that Lori simply did not have. He wanted her to fly to Germany and give the money to one of his contacts there. The whole thing seemed impossible and ridiculous.

Lori's plan at first had been to keep Florian on the hook with promises of ransom money as she collected as many details about Sam's whereabouts as she could. At one point the FBI even asked—if she could get the money together—whether she'd be willing to travel to Germany to set a trap. It was too dangerous, she decided—Lori had her own kids to think about. She'd just managed to get partial custody and it was important to her to raise them differently than she'd been raised—and for that, she had to stay alive. Still, Florian kept messaging. So Lori decided to give the FBI access to her WhatsApp and Telegram accounts, so they could keep talking to him while pretending to be her. When Florian asked for more selfies, her FBI handler Max even asked Lori if she would be willing to send some.

As February bled into March, Lori and Florian became more suspicious of each other's motives. Lori was positive that Florian was more a composite than a real person, perhaps a combination of Moussa and Abdelhadi and even a third friend who took turns talking to her. And Florian, if that's who he really was, had seemed to realize that the person on the other end of the Telegram message wasn't Lori anymore. By the end of March, he was no longer responding to the messages the FBI sent through Lori's account.

Lori was distraught. This was her one chance at getting Sam back home, and it seemed like it was leading nowhere. She leaned on Max for intel, but he resisted, frustrating her. Besides, sometimes it seemed like she knew more than the FBI did; when Lori received any scrap of information she immediately sent it to Max, who frequently appeared surprised by what she

knew. Maybe he was a good actor—or maybe because Lori had committed her life to this case, she really did have more information than he did.

Every so often he'd call and check in. "As far as we know the kids are fine," Max told her on April 4, 2017, over the phone, nearly two months after her search began. "Everything we have indicates they're okay, as well as [Sam].

"We're doing our best to do everything we can," he assured Lori. "But it's difficult for us because we can't be there, we can't go there and get her. Unfortunately she put herself in that situation and it looks like she's trying to do everything she can. *You've* done everything you can. I feel bad because there was nothing else that I think you can do to help her at this point, except to keep telling us so we can do what we can on our side."

For months Lori hadn't taken a new work contract, choosing instead to focus full-time on the search for her sister. Every waking hour was spent thinking about Sam, about ISIS, about Syria. She'd called senators and lawyers, family aid groups and foreign embassies. She'd called local politicians, and when they refused to return her calls, she showed up at their offices. She still had her phone volume set to loud, so she could be jolted awake at any hour by the ping of a Telegram or Facebook message. Lori was in far too deep now; there's no way she could just stop looking.

After four months with no word from Sam, and about two months after Florian had stopped responding to the FBI's messages, Lori received a voice message from a phone number she didn't recognize.

It was Sam. "Hey Lori, I just wanna say keep making your prayers for us," she said. She sounded exhausted and beaten down. "You don't understand, here instead of just leaving us be all the time we hear the jets and bombs and it's a part of daily life here, ya know? I don't know when I'll be able to talk to you next. It may be a while. Anyway, here in just a minute I'm gonna let the kids send a message. You'll get that one just after me. I hope you know that I love you and I miss you so much."

After that, Michael took the phone. "Hi Lori, I miss you. Remember that day when you took me to the zoo? I miss you," he said. Then four-year-old Nadia recited after her mother: "I love you. How are you? I can't wait to see you. Make me food."

In the background of the message, Lori could hear the sound of a baby happily gurgling. About a year earlier, in 2016, Sam had given birth to a fourth child, a daughter she named Aisha. Lori had a new niece.

Despite his serious injury in February 2017, Moussa did not die; instead he became even more addicted to painkillers, and after some time convalescing at home, again began working as a sniper.

That spring, word spread among the ISIS fighters that Kurdish forces were preparing a siege on Raqqa, which by then was the only major city in Syria that ISIS still controlled. Moussa considered taking the family out of Raqqa, but ultimately decided not to. Sam was relieved: She felt strongly, she wrote in her diary, that if they could just survive the siege, ISIS would eventually be defeated and she could be rescued by American forces. If she moved to another part of the country occupied by the Islamic State, Sam reasoned, who knew what would happen.

As the Syrian Democratic Forces advanced closer to the city and the final battle approached, thousands of ISIS fighters and civilians began their exodus from Raqqa. US-backed Kurdish fighters had begun phase three of their campaign to retake Raqqa, liberating towns alongside its eastern border to isolate the city from outside contact. Raqqa was blockaded and besieged—nothing and no one could get in or out. Sam stocked up on whatever food and provisions she could get her hands on—bulging ten-pound bags of rice and flour, dozens of tanks of cooking gas, and diapers for Ilyas and Aisha. She dispatched Soad and Bahar to the pharmacy to buy whatever medicines were left, and they began bringing extra water home from the well. The first few weeks of the battle weren't too difficult—Moussa was off fighting most of the time, and the gunfire and air strikes were pretty far from where they lived. Many days they would sit outside in the sun making bread as mortars fell just a few hundred yards away.

But as the fighting neared their home, the bleak reality closed in on them. Soon after the siege began, on an evening in July around 7 p.m., American-backed forces bombed the building next to Sam and Moussa's home. Sam was outside when the first blast occurred, and she was thrown violently against the wall. She lost consciousness as the second and third explosions covered her in rocks, debris, and shrapnel; the bombed-out building had collapsed onto her home.

Bahar and Soad were asleep in the room closest to where the bombs struck, along with Nadia, Ilyas, and baby Aisha. They woke up to a sudden, terrifying boom, and then total darkness. The room was filled with smoke, Soad realized, and when she tried to breathe she inhaled a thick soup of particulates. She and Bahar tried to scream, but they were temporarily deaf

from the blast and couldn't hear their own voices. The concrete walls began collapsing around them; one gave Nadia a bloody gash on the back of her head, another ripped the flesh off Bahar's leg straight through to the bone. Soad could not see or hear anything. She thought she might already be dead; if she wasn't, she would be soon.

Outside, Sam regained consciousness and began screaming frantically for Bahar and Soad. The blast had blown off her sandals, and as she ran into the half-collapsed house, debris and shrapnel bloodied the soles of her bare feet. She charged toward the bedroom where they'd all been sleeping. Gunpowder and dust made it impossible to see. She dug at the rubble surrounding the door, then slowly heaved it open to reveal her children's bedroom. The house's exterior wall had completely caved in, burying Bahar, Soad, and the three children. Miraculously, they had survived. Sam helped them dig themselves out and cleared a path out of the collapsing house, and together they escaped to the street.

When Sam got outside, she realized that Michael and Ayham were not with them. She started screaming their names, her voice choked with dust and grief. A few moments later the boys appeared at the end of the street; they had been out walking when the blast hit and had run to another house for safety.

When the planes disappeared and the street had gone quiet, Sam took everyone to the nearby ISIS-run hospital, where they were given water and treated for their injuries. Sam knew they couldn't go back to that house—there was almost no house to go back to—but they also could not safely leave Raqqa during the siege. When Moussa got back from the front lines on the outskirts of the city later that week, he moved them to another house within the city, but by then nowhere was safe. Planes flew overhead constantly, and just a month after their move the street behind their new home was carpet bombed. But they stayed: The fighting had a largely predictable schedule, usually petering out around dusk, and if they were careful they could avoid the worst of it. Mostly they tried to continue living, which by then had become an act of bravery in itself. For the few hours each day when the bombing was at its height, they would all cower in the corner of the house while Sam sang "You Are My Sunshine" to calm Soad, Bahar, and the children. She whispered, "*Inshallah*, it will all be okay" over and over, for their benefit and her own; maybe if she said it enough, it would magically come true. Despite her hopeful incantations, all they were

doing crammed together in that dark room covered in dust and dirt was waiting to die.

By August, most of ISIS's Iraq territory had been recaptured by Iraqi forces and freed from ISIS rule. On July 10, 2017, the Iraqi prime minister officially declared victory over ISIS in Mosul. Meanwhile, the coalition-backed Syrian Democratic Forces had spent the summer encircling Raqqa, closing off any roads that led to and from the city in an attempt to surround and subsequently eradicate ISIS. As the Caliphate's defeat grew more likely, thousands of foreign fighters for ISIS gave up arms and tried to blend in as civilians so they could escape; on August 4, 2017, coalition forces estimated that only 2,000 fighters remained in Raqqa. Moussa and Abdelhadi Elhassani were two of them.

The Elhassani family survived through the summer as SDF soldiers reclaimed neighborhood after neighborhood, corralling them into an ever-smaller territory. Syrian forces had begun to besiege the area of Old Raqqa where the family was living, so to escape the combat and worsening food shortage they moved to a new home outside of Old Raqqa.

As SDF forces drew closer, many of the buildings in the city were reduced to rubble. The family was constantly on the lookout for shelter, usually two-story single-family homes that were too small to become targets. To escape from shelter to shelter with all their food and supplies, they would often leave with just the clothes they were wearing, expecting to find new clothes at whatever location they ended up in. The city took on a distinctive smell: sour, pungent, microbial. It was the smell of dead bodies.

As Sam fought to survive the siege of Raqqa, Lori was preparing for her wedding. After five years of dating Hariss, two years after she'd officially divorced Yassine, Lori felt ready to get married again. For the courthouse ceremony, Lori was planning to wear a gold and green sari-styled dress, black platform stilettos, and bright red lipstick. Hariss would don a tie and jacket, with his bushy black beard neatly trimmed.

Just a few days before the ceremony—and six months after Sam sent her the two disturbing videos of Michael assembling weapons—a BBC journalist emailed Lori another clip, one that he'd heard ISIS was about to publicize. Josh Baker had been working on a story about Lori's attempts to track down Sam and the kids, and he'd come across the video in his research. Lori had been trying to get Sam out of Syria for months, but the

distance between her life in South Bend and Sam's in Raqqa seemed as vast and unbridgeable as ever.

Sitting in her living room, Lori clicked the video and began to watch. White script, Arabic, floated over a black screen. Then two logos appeared: one for the Islamic State, and one for Raqqa Wilayah, the official name for ISIS's Raqqa Governorate. The logos gave way to a close-up image of rocket mortars and the sound of an ISIS battle chant. Scenes of ISIS fighters preparing for battle flashed before Lori's eyes, as a leader chanted phrases in Arabic that she couldn't understand. Then, thirty-five seconds in, she saw him: Michael, her ten-year-old nephew, dressed in a dark *thawb* and artillery vest, a black bandanna wrapped around his head. It was the propaganda video ISIS had forced Michael and Ayham to shoot a few months prior.

In the video, Michael looks malnourished and a little scared, his dark eyes following the instructions of a jihadi who is teaching him how to operate a machine gun. After more scenes of fighters putting on suicide belts and planning attacks, Michael appears again, wearing a white T-shirt and staring directly into the camera. When Lori heard him speak, she immediately began to sob.

"My name is Yusuf and I'm ten years old," he says in English, reading off a script, as Arabic subtitles play below. "Two years ago I made *hijrah* from America, the land of *kuffar*, to the Islamic State. My father is an American soldier, who fought the *mujahideen* in Iraq. I didn't know much about Islam except the name. When me and Mom came to the Islamic State, we started to learn the correct Islamic creed, and everything else which was hidden from us when we were living alongside nonbelievers."

The camera cuts to Michael in a yellow T-shirt leaning against a red, white, and black painted wall, reading the Quran. "Here in the Islamic State, Muslims from around the world have united to establish the rule of Allah," he continues.

Lori, watching her nephew being used as a prop in a terrorist propaganda video, was overwhelmed with nausea, fear, and anger. Anger at the Islamic State, for what they were forcing Michael to do, but also at her sister, who had dragged her children to Syria, where they were being used as bait for American forces. Horrified, she couldn't press pause.

"I have met many friends," Michael says. "My best friend is Abdullah from Sinjar."

Michael pulls water up from a well and helps an emaciated young boy with hauntingly hollow eyes perform *wudu*, the ritual washing of parts of the body Muslims perform before prayer. “My name is Abdullah and I’m from Sinjar,” the boy says, with a slight hint of a lisp. “*Alhamdulillah*, when the Islamic State liberated Sinjar they took me with them.”

Lori had never met Abdullah, didn’t know who he was or where he came from, but her heart ached for him just the same. He was so small; he still had his baby teeth, and his ears stuck out at an endearingly awkward angle. He was dressed in the same dusky gray *thawb* as Michael. Abdullah was Ayham—the young Yezidi boy whom Moussa had taken as a slave—although Lori wouldn’t know that until much later.

“I live with Yusuf in the same house, and Islam is what unites Yusuf and I together,” Ayham says.

The video switches to a small living room in Raqqa, with brown curtains and an antique love seat. Laundry hangs on a line in the courtyard outside. A glass door is propped open and sunlight pours into the room. Michael is carrying Ayham on his shoulders, as he giggles and holds up his pointer finger, a symbol of allegiance to the Islamic State.

More scenes flashed on the screen of Lori’s computer: Michael staring pensively out a window, his hands pressed up against the glass, as he talks in voice-over about the American coalition attacks on Raqqa. Michael on a balcony overlooking a Raqqa courtyard, the sound of bombs behind him. Michael and Ayham in a destroyed mosque, holding a copy of the Quran and speaking about the “trials” facing the Islamic State. Logos of warplanes, tanks loaded with automatic weapons. Michael and Ayham climbing on a jungle gym in a playground in central Raqqa, rubble all around them, moving with a self-consciousness that belies their awareness that they’re being filmed by ISIS propagandists.

Lori sat in shock in the safety of her cozy South Bend living room, watching as her nephew spoke with expertise about American weaponry and narrated the horrors of war in an alarming monotone. Was this the same boy who had chased Cassidy around the playground in Elkhart? Who had tended to his mother with the gentleness of an adult?

“I’m not scared from their planes,” Michael says, before the scene cuts to an ISIS fighter yelling *Allahu Akbar* and shooting a rocket launcher into the sky at one of the B-52s. Then he directly addresses then-president

Donald Trump. “By the will of Allah we will have victory. So get ready, for the fighting has just begun.”

Now Michael is armed with an automatic weapon, his head covered in black cloth as Ayham trails behind him holding a pair of night vision binoculars. They follow a fighter through a hole cut into a wall that allows them to move between different houses in Raqqa. Michael drives a metal pick into the wall. With Ayham beside him, he loads bullets into an automatic magazine. His hands are small; a blue plastic watch, clearly too big for him, flops on his wrist.

Michael holds a pair of binoculars to his eyes, then puts them down. He stares off-camera, clearly reading a script. “Do you think that we’re going to leave? Do you think that we’ll be finished?” he asks in Arabic, as English subtitles flash on the screen. “Never! We will remain until the day of judgment, with Allah’s permission.”

He looks through the scope of a rifle and releases the safety. The screen fades to black.

Lori sat back in her floral armchair, and for a moment she let her emotions undulate over her: terror and disbelief that her sister and children were in this situation, anger at Sam for putting Michael at risk, and despair, because she was unsure any of them would make it out of Syria alive. Then she picked up the phone and dialed Max, the FBI agent.

By the next week, the video had spread across international news media. People all over the world knew that ISIS was grooming a ten-year-old American boy to be a terrorist. But it wasn’t their nephew.

One morning in the first week of September 2017, Moussa slunk dejectedly around the latest house they were sheltering in, delaying his departure for battle. The front was so close now that he was able to return to his family whenever he was given a break. According to Sam’s diary, when she told him he was going to be late, his head snapped up as if he’d just been awoken from a dream. Then he looked at her with eyes full of desperation.

“Please pray for my death,” he said, as he headed toward the door.

A few days later, Moussa died in a drone strike on the battlefront in Raqqa. A death certificate issued by ISIS shows he was “martyred” on September 6, 2017, more than two years after he moved his family to Syria to join the Islamic State. When Sam’s brother-in-law Abdelhadi appeared

on her doorstep to deliver the news, Sam could barely contain her glee. When he left, she told the kids what had happened, and they started jumping up and down and crying tears of joy.

Still, it was almost impossible for Sam to comprehend the fact that Moussa was truly gone. She had loved him once, so long ago, in Indiana. When they said their wedding vows, holding hands in the middle of that wood-paneled living room, she'd wanted to be with him forever. But for the last two years, Sam had both wished for her husband to die and dreaded what his death would portend. Now that he was finally gone, the mix of shock, relief, and fear was paralyzing. After his death, she found herself reciting competing prayers—one that he go straight to hell, and one that he be forgiven by God and go to heaven—sometimes even on the same day.

According to ISIS's laws, control and ownership of Moussa's property after his death went to his brother Abdelhadi, who was also now responsible for caring for Sam and the children. Like the home they lived in, and all of their possessions, Soad, Ayham, and Bahar also technically became the "property" of Abdelhadi. Bahar and Ayham were allowed to continue living with Sam and the kids, but Abdelhadi was insistent that Soad move in with him. After his first wife died in an air strike, Abdelhadi had remarried a local Syrian woman named Jamila. She was tall and thin and dark and couldn't have been older than twenty-two, even though by then Abdelhadi was in his late thirties. Against Jamila's objections, Soad moved into Abdelhadi's home. He was the fifteenth ISIS fighter to rape her, but he would also be the last.

That fall, with the Islamic State close to losing the city, the Syrian Democratic Forces struck a deal to allow hundreds of people to be bused out of Raqqa before the final stages of the siege began. Though it would surely save the lives of many US-backed soldiers and civilians, it also allowed safe passage of ISIS fighters—and in some cases, their arms and artillery—out of the city. Since the summer, ISIS had been relocating forces to a small area in the eastern part of Syria, near the Iraqi border. In October 2017, Abdelhadi, his wife Jamila, Sam, her children, and the Yezidis took advantage of the temporary cease-fire and boarded the convoy to the eastern Syrian city of Deir ez-Zur.

In Deir ez-Zur they all settled temporarily with Jamila's family. Almost immediately after forcing her to move in with him, Abdelhadi had impregnated Soad, which turned his wife's simmering resentment of the girl

into boiling rage. She told Soad that when she gave birth, Jamila and Abdelhadi would keep the baby and sell Soad off to the most violent fighter they could find. If he didn't agree with this plan, she threatened Abdelhadi, she would kick them all out of her family's house. It went on like that for a few weeks—Jamila viciously threatening Soad and passive-aggressively berating her husband—until she realized Abdelhadi would never agree, and she made good on her threat. Jamila kicked them all out and told Abdelhadi never to speak to her again.

It was a bold move for the wife of a jihadi, one she never could have safely made even six months ago. But as the Islamic State crumbled, ISIS fighters and their families were forced to make choices they couldn't have imagined in the heyday of their so-called Caliphate. Once they'd been the most feared and powerful terrorist group in the world; now they were running scared from the very forces they'd tried to intimidate. ISIS officials relocated Abdelhadi, Sam, the kids, and the Yezidis to another house in Deir ez-Zur.

Though Abdelhadi had always struck Sam as a true believer—he was the one who'd gotten Moussa interested in moving to Syria in the first place—he was more lenient with Sam than she'd anticipated. It's possible that the fighting had grown so intense and his family life so miserable that he lacked the energy to subjugate Sam. He, too, was desperate to get out of Syria; he knew that if he stayed, he would die or be captured. His chances of escaping unscathed were growing slimmer by the day.

In mid-September 2017, a friend of Moussa's who lived in Raqqa reached out to Mohammad Elhassani, Moussa's father, on Telegram. *Moussa was martyred in the fight against the kuffar*, the friend told him. He attached a photo of an unrecognizable, bloodied body crushed beneath the rubble of a collapsed building. A subsequent email from Abdelhadi confirmed the news: Moussa had died in a drone strike.

Moussa's older brother Salaheddine, who was now living in Casablanca, messaged Lori on WhatsApp to tell her the news. Lori wasn't unhappy to hear the fate of her terrorist brother-in-law, but she did worry that it complicated Sam's escape. Lori hoped the coalition forces' continued assault on Raqqa would keep the ISIS machine distracted and delay the prospect of Sam having to remarry. For now, Salah told her, Sam and the

kids were staying with Abdelhadi in Deir ez-Zur; his mother, Rkia, would send Lori Abdelhadi's number, and perhaps he would let her talk to Sam.

With so few updates on Sam's whereabouts, Lori did her best throughout 2017 to at least try to go about her normal life. She took her dogs to the Michiana Pet Expo and to the Niles Avenue dog park and used henna to dye her hair from bright red to charcoal. Still, thoughts of Sam and the kids would creep back in even in moments of relative calm. "Is an ISIS sympathizer a member of ISIS?" she wrote on Facebook in August 2017. "I say yes. What do you think?"

On October 25, 2017, about six weeks after Moussa's death, Lori received Abdelhadi's phone number from his mother, Rkia, and reached out to him on Telegram. His phone number had a Philippines country code.

"*Asalaamu alaykum*," she wrote, the Arabic greeting meaning "Peace be upon you."

"Thank you so much for giving me a chance to speak with my sister," she wrote, overplaying her gratitude to lure Abdelhadi in. "You don't know how worried i have been!"

"No problem. She is free here to do what she wants," he responded in English. "But she chooses to stay in the land that is ruled by the rule of Allah instead of the rule of man.

"Have yoi [*sic*] seen Michael in isdar?" he added, referring to the ISIS propaganda film.

"The last i saw of Michael was the release of fertile land… i think that's what is was called," Lori replied, speaking about the propaganda video the journalist Josh Baker had sent her.

"Yes," Abdelhadi replied. "Mashallah he is a strong kid, soon to be a mujahid for the sake of Allah."

A few months ago, if you had asked Lori what "mujahid" meant, she'd have had no idea what you were talking about. But now, after all her research into ISIS's practices, she knew exactly what it meant: Abdelhadi was saying that soon Michael, her ten-year-old nephew, would become a martyr for the cause. Soon he would die.

Lori's hands grew clammy. She asked Abdelhadi if there was any way she could speak with Sam, either on the phone or by Telegram. He told her that she and Sam could exchange voice messages through him, but that she did not have a phone of her own.

"Is she married again?" Lori asked.

“She is still in *idda*,” Abdelhadi responded.

Idda. What was that? Lori opened another tab and googled the Arabic word. *Idda:* the period of mourning a Muslim woman must observe after being widowed before she can be remarried. A typical *idda* lasted about three months, which meant that she had less than two months to get Sam out of Raqqa before she was married off again.

“Have the authorities come ask you about [Michael] youssef after the isdar?” Abdelhadi asked.

“Of course they did,” Lori replied. “They aired the segment internationally. My friends in France saw it before we did.”

“Are they trying to find them and take them? Or did they let it go?”

“[The FBI] made the news networks take down the videos and they won’t tell me anything,” Lori said. Then: “Are you going to marry my sister?”

Abdelhadi ignored the question. “You should keep in mind that the US would rather drone their prisoners than negotiate with us,” he responded menacingly. “They droned an american woman before in here three years ago.

“Moussa *inshallah* got *shahada* fighting the American *taghoot*,” he added, using the Arabic word for opponents of the Prophet.

“I heard,” Lori said. “Are you happy?”

“Of course we are happy,” Abdelhadi replied. “*Shahada* is the highest goal a Muslim should strive for. It is what allows you to have eternal happiness in paradise.”

Lori shuddered: How could he really believe all this? That it was *good* that his brother had died? That his ten-year-old nephew should suffer the same horrible fate?

“Study the real Islam, Lori,” he added. “Not the American modified moderate islam.”

Lori had learned from her own research into ISIS that foreign fighters joined the organization for all kinds of reasons, but Abdelhadi’s reason was clear. Somewhere along the way he had been religiously radicalized, transformed from an “American modified moderate” Muslim to a hardliner willing to die for the cause.

To encourage Lori’s learnings, Abdelhadi sent through several links and quotes from the Islamic texts that he said supported ISIS’s mission—likely some of the same materials he’d been sending his family for years. He told

Lori to listen to lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical Yemeni-American imam whose preaching informed much of ISIS's doctrine, and whose videos had initially helped radicalize him and Moussa.

"Just know that Moussa was a man of truth, and that he is one of few heros of islam in our time," Abdelhadi added. "His reward is on Allah. He has fought the *kafir* enemy to protect the land of islam, himself and his family from *kuffar*. Any man who dies to protect his *deen*, his family, is a *shahid*. And whoever fights for the sake of *taghoot*, *shaitan*, America and the illusion and lies of democracy, ends up in hellfire."

Over the next few days, Abdelhadi continued to send Lori ISIS propaganda and Lori subtly pushed back, while also being conscious of the fact that she couldn't challenge Abdelhadi too much—he was the only contact she had with her sister.

"Did you hear what happened in New York?" she asked him on November 1, 2017. She was referring to the West Side Highway truck attack that had occurred the day before, when an ISIS affiliate drove a truck along the Hudson River bike path in lower Manhattan, killing eight people and injuring eleven others.

"Yeah I heard what happened in NY," he responded. "Did you hear about the building that American missiles brought down to the ground killing with it my wife and her whole family along with six other families? Among many other buildings in many other Muslim towns. No you didn't. Because you live among *kuffar*, and listen to their media, and are concerned for their safety and are saddened by the news of their dead only."

So Abdelhadi had been married, and his wife had died. Lori felt bad for him, even if he had brought the situation upon himself. "Do you have children?" she asked, but he didn't respond.

On November 3 at 7:45 a.m., Lori's phone buzzed as she was relaxing in her Mama Bear chair, the one where she'd been sitting when she first learned Sam was in Syria. She opened Telegram and saw that Abdelhadi had sent her two photos. She tapped to download them, her stomach churning.

In the first photo, Moussa is dressed in a white T-shirt and has a long, ungroomed beard. He's perched on a red Loncin motorbike, his hands gripping the black handlebars. In front of him is Nadia, her hair curly and wet, her tiny hands placed on the handlebars next to Moussa's. Behind him is "Abdullah," the boy from the ISIS propaganda film, and then Michael in

a brown *dishdasha*, the two of them holding Moussa around the waist. They're all grinning as they pose proudly on the bike on an empty street in Raqqa.

In the next photo, Michael and Nadia are in front of a house that has been reduced to rubble. It was the house Abdelhadi had talked about—the one where his wife and her family had died in a bombing. Behind them is the stone fountain that had once sat in the courtyard, but everything around it had collapsed into debris. Michael is squatting with his hands on his knees, peering seriously into the camera. Nadia, dressed in a pink sleeveless shirt, holds a small orange and white kitten up to her face, which bears the hollow expression of a child who hasn't slept in days. Both are covered in the dust and dirt of a city at war.

"This was taken the day after the next door house was bombed by American Jets," Abdelhadi wrote. "We survived by the protection of Allah alone, as we were all outside where you see the rubble."

Lori didn't want to betray her shock to Abdelhadi, so she simply responded: "Thank you so much! I miss them so much!" and then sent along some photos of her children Cassidy and Mac playing dress-up.

"It's great to see Cassidy and Mac, I love them very much," Abdelhadi responded. "What hurts me is to see them grow up like the kids of *kuffar*; without a purpose, just blindly following and living the lifestyle of *kuffar*."

The next day, Lori wrote to Abdelhadi again. "20 more people dead here," she texted, referring to the 2017 Sutherland Springs church shooting in Texas, a non-ISIS-affiliated attack in which twenty-six people died and twenty-two others were injured. "so much death, so much sadness. Is it wrong to want better for our children?"

"It makes me happy to hear about dead *kuffar*," Abdelhadi wrote back. "Just as it makes *kuffar* happy to hear about dead Muslims. Whoever is in the gray area is a lost soul. The prophet pbuh [Peace Be Upon Him] said the *kafir* and his killer do not meet in hellfire. Meaning the Muslim who kills the *kafir* does not go to hell. Your feeling about death is oddly similar to *kuffar*. Why do you hate death so much? Aren't you longing for meeting your Lord?"

Lori tried to argue back the only way she knew Abdelhadi would listen: by finding quotes from the hadiths and passages from the Quran that dissented from his viewpoint. But Abdelhadi was steadfast in his beliefs, and though Lori hated everything he was saying, she knew it was dangerous

to challenge him too aggressively. Instead, she let him bombard her with extremist material and held her tongue.

Ever since Abdelhadi had let the sisters occasionally exchange voice messages, they'd developed a code he couldn't understand, relaying childhood memories to serve as allegories for what was happening in their lives. In this way, Sam found ways to tell Lori about what was really going on without Abdelhadi catching on.

Sam was finally organizing her escape. On November 3, the Syrian government declared victory over ISIS in Deir ez-Zur, where Sam, Abdelhadi, Soad, Bahar, Ayham, and the kids had been living. A few days later, Bahar was able to use a neighbor's phone to get in contact with one of her uncles who served in the Kurdish forces. Together they began to arrange a rescue plan; Sam would pay the neighbor ten ounces of pure gold—some of which she'd gotten from their safe after Moussa's death, and some she'd stolen from Abdelhadi—to smuggle them out of ISIS territory. Once they reached the red line, they would turn themselves over to Kurdish forces, who would be expecting their arrival.

On November 9, the Syrian army declared victory over all of the Islamic State troops in Syria. That same day, Sam sent a voice message to Lori using Abdelhadi's phone. She hoped it sounded innocent to him, but she wanted Lori to hear it and realize that she was getting ready to run.

> *Hey Lori this is Sam, I just want to tell you I love you so much and I miss you I miss all of our family please tell everybody I love them and I miss them and that we're fine, we're okay. And just so you know everything is okay, remember the time we were at the neighbor's house swimming in the pool, Mom and Dad said we could go swim in the pool anytime we wanted to and one of the neighbor kids fell in and you jumped in and saved her? I remember how happy you were that you saved her. I know you always want to save everybody, but sometimes you have to see who it is that really needs to be saved.*

Nine days later, Sam made her move. While Abdelhadi was out, she left him a note that she was going to visit a friend nearby, but would be back by *Asr*, the afternoon prayer. Instead, Sam, Soad, Bahar, Ayham, Michael, Nadia, Ilyas, and Aisha piled into their neighbor's pickup truck and sped off across the Syrian desert toward what they hoped would be freedom. To avoid any trouble, they'd hidden Michael, who was fighting age, inside a

barrel. The journey was grueling and terrifying; at any moment they could've been captured by ISIS fighters, Assad-backed Syrian forces, or by other militants who would gladly kidnap them for ransom.

Sam had no idea what would happen to them even if they did make it into the hands of the Kurds. Though she'd arranged the plan with Bahar's uncle, it was unclear how much power he really had. For all she knew, it could be a trap—it's not like she spoke Kurmanji. Sam had been the wife of an ISIS fighter, and her son had appeared in ISIS propaganda videos threatening the US and other Western countries. Together Sam and her husband had enslaved the Yezidi women who were now arranging their escape. Who's to say she wouldn't be thrown into a Kurdish prison forever—or worse? Still, it was a risk she had to take. What other choice did she have? If she stayed in Deir ez-Zur she and her children would die—of that she was certain.

All that way, from Deir ez-Zur to the Kurdish red line, Sam heard in her head the closing music of a movie where the hero won. It wasn't that she thought she was a hero, but for the first time in a while she allowed herself to contemplate the possibility that her story might actually have a happy ending.

Huddling with her children in the bed of the pickup truck, Sam clutched a loaded 9mm Glock her neighbor had given her beneath her *hijab* in case anything went wrong. In the middle of the desert, the smuggler pulled up beside the waiting Kurdish military vehicle, and Sam took her chance. She waited until the very last minute, and then, when she couldn't possibly wait anymore, she pulled the gun from beneath her headscarf, unloaded it, and handed it to the smuggler, along with a ten-ounce gold bar. Sam and her seven charges slowly emerged from the car and took their first steps into the unknown.

Chapter Twelve

When Lori first heard Sam's message with the fake story about the neighbor's pool, and how sometimes people need to rescue themselves, she knew right away it was Sam's way of saying she didn't need her help anymore. Her sister was getting ready to run.

Ten days later, on November 19, Abdelhadi sent Lori a suspicious message saying that he was now considering helping Sam and the kids escape from Syria. In all of their prior conversations, Abdelhadi had insisted he'd rather they all die than escape back to the "land of *kuffar*," but suddenly he seemed willing to negotiate. If Lori could send him money through Western Union, he said, he would pay a smuggler to get Sam and the children out while the SDF and ISIS were still under a cease-fire. He asked for just $4,000—a pittance compared to the $100,000 Florian had wanted.

Lori didn't have the money, but Abdelhadi's mother, Rkia, told Lori she would front it. Lori had always suspected the Elhassani parents knew more about their sons' extremism than they let on, and her willingness to send her ISIS-affiliated son money only strengthened that suspicion. Rkia's one stipulation was that Lori had to send it because she was afraid to get in trouble. Lori asked her sources at the FBI what she should do, and they told her to send the money. But before she could get it together, Lori received a WhatsApp message from Rkia.

"*Alhamdu lillah* Sam and the kids are gone, but we don't know where," she said. "We wanted to tell her that we are glad for her and she is welcome if she want to come here [to Morocco] before joining America."

It took a few hours for Lori to see the message, but when she did, her heart started thumping against her ribs, her anxiety levels spiking. "What do you mean they are gone?" she replied.

"They left the home where they were with Abdelhadi, without Abdelhadi," Rkia replied. "He is also worried about them."

"Now I'm confused," Lori responded. "Abdelhadi is asking me to send him money to send them away. But you're telling me they already left."

"When did he ask you?" Rkia wrote back, indicating that the request for money was no longer an issue. "Because she left him a note that she will go visit some lady and come back at *asr* time, but he came around *isha* time

and didn't find them. She left with all the money that Abdelhadi used to keep with her, basically all his money, and left him with nothing, in addition to the money Moussa left her. Without Abdelhadi knowing anything about her leaving."

A wry, thin smile crept across Lori's face. Sam had done it; she had escaped, just like her message about jumping in the pool had indicated. But Lori's relief upon hearing the news was coupled with a new fear: Where the hell was Sam now? Lori knew from watching the news that the Syrian government had declared victory over ISIS, meaning Sam and the kids *could* be free and on the run, but they could also be in ISIS custody, Syrian government custody, or coalition custody. She didn't know what to think.

Lori pulled up her Telegram conversation with Abdelhadi and shot him a message. "Where are my sister and the kids?" she wrote. The next day he responded. "Why are you asking me this. I told you the answer before," Abdelhadi said, indicating Rkia had told him that she'd told Lori they'd escaped. "Pray that she is ok."

The next day, it was Abdelhadi who contacted Lori. "Did you hear from Sam?" he asked.

"No I am very worried," she responded.

"They turned up in the PKK news," he said, referring to a Kurdish militia news source.

"The kids are with her right?"

"Yes."

"Can you send me the link?"

"You know how she betrayed and robbed me, right?" he shot back.

"I was told."

"I will never forgive her."

"Maybe she was trying to save her children," Lori countered.

"She had plenty of her money and the kids. Over $30000. She didn't have to take my money," Abdelhadi wrote. "And i can assure you, that all the money was likely stolen from her in different checkpoints."

Lori rolled her eyes; was she supposed to feel bad for him, the terrorist who wanted her and everyone else she knew dead?

"Can you send me the link to the news please?" she wrote.

Abdelhadi messaged a link to a website called Hawar News, a Kurdish news agency run by the Democratic Union Party in northeast Syria. Lori clicked the link and the page began to load. "Yezidi Family Liberated

During a SDF Special Operation," the headline read. The article was dated November 17, 2017:

> *Today, Saturday at 5:30 am, the Syrian Democratic Forces carried out a special operation in the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor. The forces liberated an 8-member Yezidi family, 5 of them are children and 3 women, from IS mercenaries. The forces brought the family into the liberated areas. The family told Hawar News Agency correspondent that many families, children and women remained at the hands of IS mercenaries.*

Alongside the article were several photos of Sam, five children, and two unidentified women. The women wear the loose black *abaya* typical of ISIS wives, with their *niqabs* flipped back over their heads to expose their faces. In one photo, they sit on a thin mattress in the shade of a dirty cement building, surrounded by blankets, Life water bottles, and thin wheels of Kurdish bread. Nadia is sitting on the lap of a female SDF fighter, her arm tucked around the fighter's neck and her tiny face covered in dirt. Sam is next to her, hunched over and smoking a cigarette, and to her left is a toddler, looking filthy and malnourished. A baby in a blue snowsuit and graying white hat drinks from a bottle in the lap of one of the women in black. Beside her are Michael and another young boy, both with their hoods up and wearing flimsy medical masks, tucked beneath a blanket with their hands folded politely in their laps.

When Lori first saw the photos she didn't recognize Sam; her face was obscured by the black cloth in half of them, and the photo quality was grainy. But when she zoomed in she saw her: her older sister, her closest friend and foil, the woman she'd been trying for the last year to save from ISIS.

"Did you notice, they didnt mention anything about them being american?" Abdelhadi messaged her, after Lori had some time to examine the photos. "I am worried they will send them to sinjar where the Yezidis are and treat the kids as slaves."

"I will not allow that," Lori shot back. "The other women were Yezidi, yes?"

"Yes, we treated them like family. Sam freed the one smiling," he added, referring to Soad. He did not tell her that he'd gotten Soad pregnant.

"But they were slaves right?" Lori countered. "No one is happy being a slave. Even if they are treated like family. They were probably scared." Lori

was horrified that her sister had participated in slavery and human trafficking; it seemed extreme, even for Sam, so unlike how she was as a girl—defiant, chafing against any confinement.

“You have to understand that slavery is not *haram* in islam,” Abdelhadi argued. “These were Yezidis, they worship satan. After they were enslaved, they learned Islam. And most of them claimed to embrace islam.”

“Anyways, lets just hope they didnt betray sam and concocted this plan to take her with them and have her be their slave in sinjar,” he added.

“Let me ask you,” Lori wrote. “Honestly, if Sam wanted to leave [Syria], would she have been allowed to, without fear of death or retaliation?”

“I would have allowed it,” Abdelhadi said. “Many brothers send their families back. Because its gotten tough and there is little room left. But she left on the day of the cease fire. If she only knew that it has all come to an end.”

Was that true? Lori wondered. Could Sam really have escaped sooner? Was it possible that she had *chosen* to stay—not because of her commitment to the cause, necessarily, but because she was too afraid to be sent to jail when she got home? Other Americans who had so much as tried to join ISIS had been charged and jailed. Was Sam afraid she’d face the same fate?

Lori toggled back to the photos of Sam sitting in the dusty Syrian countryside draped in the clothing of the Islamic State. Her face, framed by red and black cloth, seemed suddenly hardened, impossible to read. After all these years, hadn’t Lori learned? She couldn’t save Sam; only Sam could save herself.

Chapter Thirteen

When Sam and her charges ended up in the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces in November 2017, the on-the-ground military operations against ISIS were coming to an end, and 95 percent of the territory the group had once captured for its Caliphate had been liberated. The US military insisted it would fight ISIS in Syria "for as long as they want to fight," according to then-secretary of defense James Mattis, but the reality was that the once-powerful group had dwindled down to little more than a thousand members hiding in rural areas of Syria and Iraq. Now it was time to look toward rebuilding the areas ISIS had terrorized.

When they first arrived in Kurdish territory, Soad and Bahar told their rescuers—young male and female members of the Syrian Democratic Forces—that they were all Yezidi, covering for Sam by pretending she was a member of their family. The soldiers drove the family to a nearby post and gave the kids crackers and bottles of water and blankets to wrap themselves in. The female soldiers shared their cigarettes with Sam, and a photographer for a local Kurdish newspaper snapped photos, in which Sam and the kids look filthy and exhausted. It took only a few hours for the soldiers to realize that Sam didn't speak Kurmanji and didn't look particularly Kurdish. When the SDF grew suspicious of her cover and threatened jail if they didn't tell the truth, Bahar admitted that Sam was an ISIS widow.

Soad and Bahar wanted to be reunited with their families. They were young, just eighteen and fifteen, had suffered terribly, and had been separated from their loved ones for years. They had come to see Sam as a second mother and feared that if they were sent back to Iraq and Sam was taken to jail, they would never see each other again. What would happen to the promise Sam had made about opening an Iraqi restaurant together? But as the wife of a dead ISIS fighter, Sam was a criminal under Kurdish law. The SDF began tracking down Soad, Bahar, and Ayham's families. Before the girls were separated, Sam gave some of the gold and cash she'd stolen from Abdelhadi to Soad. "For the baby," she said. Soad hid it in the lining of her baggy clothes, and then she—and Bahar and Ayham with her—was gone.

Sam and her kids were passed between Kurdish military bases before being placed in a camp in northeastern Syria, close to the border with Iraq. At the time, the camp where they were taken, Camp Roj, housed locals who'd had to flee from northern Syria as ISIS took its last stand against the Western-backed Syrian Defense Force, burning villages and farms in its wake. Camp Roj also held people suspected of being ISIS members, many of them some of the hundreds of women from around the world married to men who fought for ISIS. When the Caliphate crumbled, these women escaped or were captured, and now they lived in tents with their children, hoping to go home.

Sam, Michael, Nadia, Ilyas, and Aisha were assigned a canvas tent, Tent 106, about the size of a large closet. There was hardly any ventilation, which made it either hot and sticky or bitter cold, depending on the season. When they first arrived it was the beginning of winter and there was barely enough room for them to lie down on the floor together to sleep. Sam used a small plastic water jug for a chair, and the family slept together in a pile, huddling close when it was cold. She cooked what food was available—usually dried peas and rice, rarely anything fresh—over a propane burner. They had to squat over a hole in the ground instead of a toilet, and diapers were scarce. Tuberculosis and hepatitis ravaged the camp. Sam and Ilyas both contracted hepatitis and were put on antiviral medications; her youngest children, Aisha and Ilyas, were especially malnourished and weak. Sam believed they were slowly dying.

American FBI agents, who had been alerted by the Syrian Democratic Forces that they had an American family in custody, showed up at her tent on Sam's first full day in Roj. By then she was completely drained. The fear and anxiety that had been coursing through her for more than two years was abating, and the true depth of her psychological brokenness had begun to reveal itself. Sam told the FBI her story in that first meeting, which lasted four days: She said that Moussa had used the kids to force her over the Turkish-Syrian border, but also that she had known all along about his interest in ISIS. She said that she was a victim, a captive of his physical abuse and ideology, and that her wrong choices simply hadn't seemed like choices at all.

Within the first few days of arriving in Roj, Sam began writing her diary, which she called "The Truth." Over nearly 150 pages in a spiral-bound turquoise notebook with images of flowers and butterflies on the

front, Sam scrawled her version of events, starting with when she first met Moussa in Elkhart. From the very beginning, Sam deliberately casts herself as both an unwitting accomplice and a helpless victim, admitting that she made some bad decisions—"this is a real life lived with one horrible mistake after another," she writes—but always, in the end, maintaining that when it came to joining ISIS, she was innocent. "I should start this book by telling you who I am," she begins. "Simply put: I am the idiot."

In the diary, Sam paints herself, in alternating, often contradictory strokes, as a manipulative genius and a hapless sucker taken advantage of by her abusive husband. "If I were to sum up how I felt about [Moussa] and our marriage, the best way to describe it was 'Stay patient and you'll get what you want,'" she writes. "My husband was romantic buying expensive vacations and elaborate gifts. Everything comes at a price. My patience was essential to a successful marriage. If I stayed patient and didn't nag him to [*sic*] much almost 100% of the time I would get what I wanted." She stayed with him because she felt like she could "level him out," Sam writes. "Most times he would listen to me, I knew how to deal with him. Other times he would completely shut me out."

"This whole book has been difficult for me to write because it is a whole book about my defeat," Sam wrote in closing. "I didn't write this to be labelled a victim, I am not. But also, I am NOT a terrorist."

When Sam wrote the diary, she had already been interviewed by the FBI and was being held captive in a refugee camp in a foreign country. With plenty of time to sit around and think in her tent in the refugee camp, and to strike up friendly conversations with guards thrilled to practice their English, she must have known that there were three possible outcomes for a woman in her situation: 1) She could be abandoned by her country and left for an indeterminate amount of time in the camp, something that was happening to many other Western wives of ISIS fighters at the time; 2) She could be indicted for her crimes and rescued from the camp by the US government, only to be thrown in an American jail; or 3) She could be rescued by the US government, recognized as a victim of both her abusive husband and the Islamic State, and return home to live with her parents and raise her kids. Obviously, number three was the outcome she'd prefer—and every word she committed to the diary was meant to inch her closer to it.

As soon as she'd read the news of Sam's rescue by SDF Forces in November 2017, Lori started to work her sources. First she sent a WhatsApp message to Josh Baker, the BBC journalist on the ground in Syria who she'd been in contact with, hoping he might be able to find out from his SDF sources where they'd taken Sam. Baker told her Sam and the kids were now in Roj, a refugee camp administered by American-backed Kurdish forces and located in the Al-Hasakah Governorate of northeastern Syria, on the border with Iraq. The majority of families in the camp were Iraqis displaced by ISIS's rule, though some were ISIS suspects. Sam was one of the only Americans.

Though cell phones were scarce, Sam did manage to call Lori after she made it to Camp Roj. The connection was so bad that at first Lori thought she was being prank called, which—when Lori finally realized who she was speaking to—made them both laugh.

"How are things?" she asked Sam. "It's really good, it's really nice," Sam responded, according to an audio recording.

"How are you?"

"I'm good! I'm glad you called me," Lori replied. "I'm glad you got away from Abdelhadi."

"I've been trying to call, you don't understand," Sam said. "It's really strict here."

Sam also sent Lori an email from the camp soon after arriving. "I love you and miss you," she wrote. "believe it or not I've been without cell or internet for 2 years. How are the kids doing? Everyone on my side is doing well. I can't wait to hear back from you. I will try to respond as soon as possible. I love you and my prayers are with you. Please pray for me."

Sam began using a guard's cell phone to call Lori and update her on the situation. At first the conversations were pretty lighthearted—weirdly lighthearted, Lori thought, considering Sam was stuck in a refugee camp in war-ravaged Syria. But it wasn't long before the tenor of Sam's messages started to change. In December 2017, more than two years since Sam first left the US and a month after she'd arrived in Roj, she sounded lost. In one voice mail Lori recorded, Sam sounded desperate to get out of the camp and return to her life in the US.

Sorry I've lost my voice but I just want you to know that things are getting really tough here and I don't have any way to provide for my kiddos and things are hard. And I need your support now more than I need it ever right now. I know you hired a lawyer to try to get our passports in line and as quickly as we can get this done… things are getting pretty hard. I can't tell you anything but we just need to get out of here, we need to get out of here, we need to get out of here quick.

Lori had thought that once Sam landed in the camp, she and the kids would be promptly scooped up by American forces and flown home. But Sam, after months, had no updates about her fate, even after the interview she'd given to the FBI. At home in South Bend, Lori worked the phones. "Hi, I'm calling because, basically my sister is in Syria and she just had a baby and she's in the middle of a war zone and I don't know what to do," Lori lamented in one voice message she left at the US embassy in Baghdad. But as she bounced between the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, and various NGOs and local humanitarians, it began to dawn on her: The American government was interested in gathering information from Sam about how ISIS operated, but not necessarily in bringing her home.

Lawyers Lori spoke with warned her that the case was immensely complicated, with no real precedent; Sam had been a victim of domestic abuse who also went into ISIS territory, where her son had been trained to become a terrorist. Even if she had been coerced by her abusive husband into crossing into Syria, as Sam claimed, she still committed heinous crimes: enslaving Yezidi children, supporting the economy of the Islamic State, allowing her son to be used as a propaganda puppet of the Caliphate. Who could say if she did or did not have criminal intent?

As an American in Roj, Sam was kept mostly separate from the other ISIS wives and given extra attention and protection from the Kurdish guards. She developed a secret sexual relationship with one guard named Ahmed, and it was his phone she used to send messages to Lori back in Indiana. As the months passed, Sam's impatience grew. When American NGO personnel or military officials came to the camp, she always tried to get their attention, but they avoided her, hiding behind Kurdish security. Would she be stuck in this camp like the other foreign ISIS wives around her, expatriated by their homelands and left to stew in their own regret?

Sometimes Sam managed to convince herself the situation wasn't all that bad—she admired the Kurdish all-female military units fighting ISIS

and Michael had started talking about joining the Kurdish men's militia. She was also nervous about returning home to the US and being charged with a crime. "I don't think they can file charges against me," she told Lori by phone shortly after landing in Roj. "But I'm going to stay here until I know for sure, you understand?" Even then Sam was steadfast in her belief that she could dodge the ramifications of what she'd done—or some of them, at least.

There were other times, though, when Sam was frantic with terror. She had no way to provide for herself, no way to get anything extra for herself or her kids. When the SDF had taken her into custody they'd confiscated all the cash and gold she had left, and Sam was entirely reliant on the Kurdish soldiers for things as simple as toilet paper, food, and baby formula. To stay in their good graces, she would have to continue to convince them that she was a victim of ISIS, not a perpetrator. So a few months after her capture, when a guard told her a field producer at CNN had expressed interest in interviewing her, she knew exactly what she had to do.

After he was separated from Sam, nine-year-old Ayham was sent to live with his aunt and uncle outside Duhok, a small city in northwest Iraq. His mother, who had also been kidnapped by ISIS, was still missing, and his father was unwilling to take care of him. When Ayham arrived at the crumbling stone house on the edge of the Sharya refugee camp where his aunt and uncle lived, he was malnourished and anxious, his dark eyes sunken deep into his skull. He was devastated about being separated from Sam, whom he'd come to consider his mother, and had clearly been affected by his time in Raqqa—his favorite "game" was pretending to be an ISIS fighter killing infidels on the battlefield. His family didn't know what exactly had happened to him, but almost immediately they realized something strange: Somehow, while living as a captive under ISIS for more than two years, Ayham had learned how to speak American-accented English. When his uncle Tahsin asked Ayham where he'd learned it, he said that Umm Yusuf, the wife of the ISIS family he'd lived with, had taught it to him.

Word quickly spread across the tiny Yezidi community that Ayham had been living with an American woman who had joined ISIS. Only an estimated three hundred Americans had attempted to travel or actually traveled to the Levant to join a jihadist group, so Ayham's story was an

oddity. It didn't take long for journalists to track him down. CNN field producer Salma Abdelaziz had been in Mosul reporting on a British terror cell when she first heard about Ayham and the mysterious American woman Umm Yusuf. For months she asked around about Sam, until finally Kurdish authorities pointed her to Roj.

The influx of refugees was becoming too much for the fragile Kurdish system to bear. The Kurds—Syria's largest ethnic minority—had only autonomously governed northeastern Syria since 2012, when the Syrian revolution broke out. While the Syrian regime was distracted with trying to quell the democratic uprising, the Syrian Kurds—long hoping for their own land run by a Kurdish government—took advantage of the power vacuum by declaring the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish zone of Rojava. It was expensive to feed and house the millions of people displaced by the conflict, not to mention dangerous; as the battle against ISIS intensified, more and more fighters streamed into the camps, and their home nations, worried about the security risk, were refusing to take them back. Eager for the US and other nations to reclaim their citizens, the Kurds agreed to bring Sam and her kids to a safe house outside the camp so that Abdelaziz, CNN correspondent Nick Paton Walsh, and their crew might stir the United States to repatriate them.

When Sam walked into the lime-green living room of the safe house, Abdelaziz and the CNN team were surprised. She was wearing Western clothing—a brown button-down, black sweatpants, and a black puffy vest—and dark eyeliner and jewelry. She looked nothing like the other wives of foreign ISIS fighters they had encountered.

Sam settled onto a low-slung purple couch, folding her legs beneath her. She laughed and joked with her guards, whom the younger kids climbed like a jungle gym. But Michael had a seriousness that made him seem older than he was. The situation had forced Sam to rely on him in a way mothers don't usually rely on their ten-year-old sons. Clad in a maroon turtleneck and jeans, he sat beside Sam and ably bounced baby Aisha on his knee to keep her from crying.

The team of CNN journalists had brought energy bars and candy, which the kids eagerly gobbled up while Sam began the interview. To the CNN crew, she appeared abnormally calm and happy for someone raising four kids alone in a tent in a country at war. Away from the immediate perils of ISIS, the hubris that had led Sam into so many dangerous situations at home

was beginning to resurface, and she projected confidence that she would undoubtedly be exonerated for what she had done. Abdelaziz thought Sam seemed unfazed by her participation in the horrors of terrorism. When the interview questions grew more pointed—*Did she really think her husband was taking her on a "vacation" to the Syrian border? What about those trips to Hong Kong she made, opening bank accounts and purchasing weapons?*—Sam tried to stay calm, but grew defensive. "I was like a prisoner," she told them. "I had no choice."

There was one point on which Sam was adamant, and that was that she had used her own jewelry to purchase Soad not because she wanted to participate in ISIS's practice of slavery, but because she wanted to save her. As she stared unblinkingly into the camera, Sam appeared either incapable or unwilling to comprehend the gravity of her involvement, that she had willingly participated in human trafficking. "I would never apologize for bringing those girls to my house," she said stubbornly. "They had me and I had them. And we knew that if we were just patient we would stick together. You understand? We cooked together, we cleaned together. Drank coffee together. Slept in the same room together. I was like their mother."

"Do you now not regret enabling their serial rape?" asked Paton Walsh.

"No one will ever be able to imagine what it is like to watch their husband rape a fourteen-year-old girl. Ever," Sam told them. "And then she comes to you—me—after crying and I hold her and tell her it's going to be okay. Everything is going to be fine, just be patient."

The CNN story, published a month later in April 2018, was titled "Beaten, tortured, sexually abused: An American ISIS widow looks for a way home."

"The story of how Sally got [to Syria] is a remarkable web of mystery, compassion, and animal savagery befitting ISIS's legacy of almost surreal terror," it read. "And in it, Sally flits between the role of naive, manipulated housewife, and the savvy pragmatist able to survive the savage, male-dominated world of ISIS." In the media, at least, Sam's spin was working.

While Soad was enslaved by ISIS, what remained of her family—those who managed to evade or escape ISIS captivity—reunited on the outskirts of Khanke, a sprawling camp for internally displaced persons in the Kurdish-controlled northwest corner of Iraq. The camp was home to nearly sixteen thousand people, primarily Yezidi women and children displaced by

the Islamic State. Soad's mother, Guri, and her aunt had arrived after SDF soldiers defeated ISIS in Mosul, where they had been held captive, and moved into a one-room brick house outfitted with a small generator and several thin mattresses. (Soad's sister Samia and other children in her family were still missing when she arrived.) That's where, less than a week after being separated from Sam in Syria, Soad saw her mother for the first time in nearly two years.

Dressed in traditional all-white garments, her hair now fully gray, Guri seemed smaller and older to Soad. But the wrinkles at her eyes were the same. So was the way she scrunched her nose with happiness. Hugging her mother for the first time in so long, after so many moments where she'd convinced herself she would never see her again, Soad felt a deep sense of calm. She hadn't been shocked into silence and shame like so many of the Yezidi girls who returned home: She felt compelled to tell her mother—and the NGO workers who started coming by her new home—what had happened to her. The story of Soad's captivity crept out of her slowly—the men, the market, the American woman. She didn't think she would have survived any of it if it weren't for Sam, Soad told her mother.

Soad showed her mother the gold and money Sam had passed to her. It amounted to nearly $30,000, enough to pay a smuggler to search for Soad's sister Samia. At least that was a small relief. But still there was the problem of the baby. Soad had been too embarrassed to tell her SDF rescuers, but she came clean to her mother: Abdelhadi had raped her, and now she was several months pregnant. The two of them talked, and then agreed; soon after her arrival, Soad and her mother arranged for her to have an abortion.

By then it was 2018, nearly spring. Just three years earlier, Soad and her family had lived the happy, humble life of Yezidi Kurds in Sinjar, growing crops, raising babies, gathering for religious holidays, attending school. Now all of that was gone: Soad's town had been burned to the ground, dozens of members of her family—including her father and brothers—were still missing, and Soad was living in a refugee camp, faced with the near-impossible task of recovering from unimaginable trauma with the aid of very few resources. She was a survivor of ISIS. She was a survivor of sexual slavery and rape. She was a survivor of genocide. But still, somewhere in the deepest parts of herself, Soad was also the girl she had been before.

As Lori dug deeper into Sam's situation in the spring of 2018, she realized it was not unique. Sam was one of thousands of Western (and largely European) women and children who had lived under ISIS and were beginning to flood into refugee camps in Syria and Iraq as the Caliphate crumbled. Their home governments were wary of reclaiming and repatriating them, unwilling to take on the daunting task of separating the guilty from the innocent. Some could still be ideologically aligned with the terror group; others might be just recovering from years of brainwashing; others may have never been believers in the first place. How would governments determine who belonged in which group, and what would they do with the women once they did? And what was to be done with people like Sam, who were simultaneously victims and perpetrators?

Lori didn't want Sam to be stuck in the camp, but her primary concern was for Sam's children, true innocents who, without adequate health care or education, were languishing in Roj. Lori thought that if she could demonstrate to the US government how dire their situation was, she might be able to at least convince them to rescue Michael, Nadia, Ilyas, and Aisha. It was possible this would make getting Sam out more difficult—presumably she was banking on the total blamelessness of the children to extract her from the situation—but Lori felt the kids' well-being came first. She got in contact with Christianne Boudreau, a Canadian mother whose twenty-two-year-old son joined ISIS in 2014, and who had started a support network called Mothers for Life for parents of radicalized children. Boudreau connected Lori to Anne Speckhard, a research psychologist and director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, who agreed to conduct a psychological evaluation of Sam and the Elhassani children from afar. Lori hoped the evaluation would convince the US government to repatriate them.

For her analysis, Speckhard didn't talk to Sam or her children directly, but she did conduct interviews with Lori and Josh Baker, as well as two of Sam's exes, Raf LeBron and Michael's father, Juan Servantes. On March 13, 2018, Speckhard delivered her analysis to Lori. Her description of Sam was unflinching: "In my professional judgment, the behaviors described by her circle of family members and intimate partners appears to be one of an abuse survivor who has learned how to drug herself to deal with the emotional pain, gain acceptance by compliance with whatever group norms

are demanded of her and to make use of her own sexuality as a means of fitting in," she wrote.

Speckhard stated that the best course of action for the psychological well-being of all involved would be to have Sam and the kids brought back together to the US as fast as possible. But if Sam couldn't be brought back, she believed that Lori should be granted temporary custody of all the kids—something she said Michael's father Juan was open to—and the kids should be rescued from Roj without Sam. From there they would be brought to the US embassy in Baghdad to have their passports and paperwork issued, before returning to the US to live with Lori.

Lori was nervous about the financial and logistical complications of opening her home to four young children—especially children who had gone through what her nieces and nephews had—but she also felt hopeful that the kids might be rescued. She was still splitting custody with Yassine, who had sold the house on North 2nd Street and moved into a ranch-style home in Elkhart with his new wife, Rachel, a Muslim revert. Lori had moved to a large two-story Victorian house on a busy road in South Bend, and even though she was worried about having enough space, she desperately wanted to help Sam's kids. Time and time again Lori had tried to prove herself as the responsible, law-abiding sister; winning custody of Sam's kids would be undeniable confirmation of that.

Lori received Speckhard's report on March 13, 2018, and prepared to take it to an Indiana family court judge. Speckhard, meanwhile, attempted to use some of her connections at the State Department to speed up the process. Speckhard's husband had been the US ambassador to Belarus, so through him she got in contact with Douglas Silliman, then the US ambassador to Iraq. "Are you aware of this situation?" she asked Silliman's office. "There's four American kids, two of them have American passports, and the aunt is trying to get at least two of them home." But the State Department told her they couldn't help, citing privacy issues.

The Department of Justice, meanwhile, had other priorities. On March 21, 2018, a grand jury officially indicted Sam for one count of making false statements to the FBI. The indictment states that the alleged crime occurred on March 19, 2015, in the Northern District of Indiana—months before Sam and Moussa moved to Raqqa.

The indictment was sealed, so Lori didn't know Sam had been charged. What little she knew came from Josh Baker, the CNN article that had

recently been published, and Sam's occasional calls. When it came to Sam's status, her FBI handler, Max, also proved less than helpful. Lori was constantly pumping him for information, but he rarely obliged. On April 26, 2018, a couple of weeks after the CNN interview with Sam was published, he finally called her with a small update.

"I spoke with some of my contacts and what I can pass—it's limited—but there's some information I can kind of share with you," he said. "US officials visited Samantha and the family last week. She asked for the assistance of the government and we're now actively engaged and working and willing to assist. I can't go into specifics about it, I don't know all of the specifics, either. But that's what I'm allowed to kind of share with you now."

Meanwhile, Lori and her new ally Anne Speckhard were focused on getting the children back on US soil. The State Department told Speckhard that for the two youngest children, who were born in Raqqa, to be repatriated, they would need to take a DNA test to prove they were really Sam's kids. But the Department refused to supply the kits, so Lori would need to buy them herself from a reliable lab sanctioned by the Department, then have them shipped to Baghdad. Lori sent emails to the consulate in Baghdad arranging the kits, but it ended up being another dead end—no one responded.

The State Department seemed to be stalling as they worked to resolve a complicated jurisprudential issue. So Speckhard decided to try to tip the scale. In May 2018, she flew to Rome to attend the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Counter-Terrorism Conference. Representatives from more than fifty-seven nations across Europe, North America, and Central Asia attended the conference. With Lori's consent, Speckhard publicly presented a paper on Sam's case, hoping that the increased attention might further compel the State Department to act.

The paper, entitled "When Serving Terrorism is an 'All in the Family' Affair—How to Recover the Lost Children and Spouses of ISIS," focused on Sam's story, as well as the stories of European women who had joined ISIS. "Many women were raped inside ISIS. Many were forced into repeated marriages, raped by smugglers who helped them escape, or molested and mistreated in prisons before making their way home," she wrote. "All are likely traumatized by all they have witnessed and experienced inside ISIS. They are now facing the same emotional and

psychosocial issues they faced before leaving for ISIS, in addition to social stigma, and children that may be acting out the traumas of having lived under ISIS. They need our help."

Speckhard concluded the paper with a call to action: "Our recommendation is that governments quickly deploy legal measures alongside qualified mental health and educational support, as well as career counseling and community support, to these women to put an end to the cycle of terrorism and social stigma in their lives and the lives of their children."

While Speckhard tried to strong-arm the government into action, Lori was working with a lawyer to collect the necessary paperwork and consent forms to get temporary custody of Sam's children so that she could bring them back to the States. Things were changing in the camp: By July 2018, a tuberculosis outbreak was roaring through the refugee population and Kurdish resources were dwindling. The Kurds were desperate to repatriate foreign citizens. Through a contact at the SDF, the BBC's Josh Baker learned that the Kurdish forces would be willing to release Sam if they could arrange for a male family member (a request common in Kurdish culture) to come get her. Baker told Lori the news, and she agreed he could film the whole thing—as long as everyone was returned home safely.

It was an arrangement that would skirt direct US government involvement, but at that point it was Lori's only hope. She'd spent months begging the US government for help and had received only radio silence. Now she just needed to find a male relative who would be willing to make the dangerous trip to Syria.

First Lori called Michael's father, Juan. But Juan, who had served in the Middle East, was wary of bringing Michael back from Syria without involving the government. Lori's father, Richard, was also hesitant to get involved. He trusted the US government's judgment and urged Lori to do so as well. Richard worried that Michael's indoctrination made him dangerous. He was a ten-year-old boy, sure, but he was also trained to be a terrorist. If the government brought him back, they wouldn't just let him loose; he'd need to be reprogrammed and reacclimatized into American life.

"I don't want them to stay over there, Lori," he told her during the call. "But we're in a very delicate situation. And if you're not careful for you, Lori… you're going outside our government for a lot of help. I know you're

doing what you had to do, Lori, but if you ain't careful you're gonna end up in prison yourself."

Lori was undeterred. Josh Baker put her in touch with Clive Stafford Smith, a British attorney who was building a name for himself negotiating the release of US and British citizens from refugee camps in the Middle East. Smith had experience on the ground in Syria, and he volunteered to go to Roj in place of a male family member. Smith would team up with Baker, who would film the rescue and subsequent effort to get the proper documentation for the children back at the US embassy in Baghdad.

But just as they were about to put their plan into action, American forces beat them to it. In July, US military personnel entered Camp Roj and took custody of Sam and her four children, as well as a Michigan-born man named Ibraheem Musaibli who had been captured by Kurdish forces fighting for ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Together they flew back on a military cargo plane to the Gary-Chicago civil-military airport to face their fates.

It's unclear what finally spurred the government into action—Lori believes the FBI knew of her clandestine rescue plan and wanted to head it off; Anne Speckhard thinks her OSCE presentation had something to do with it. Whatever the case, Lori learned of the mission through the media, not through her contacts at the State Department or FBI. Right before the rescue, the *New York Times* published an article about Musaibli that briefly mentioned Sam, revealing she'd soon be coming home. The cases against the two, the *Times* argued, would test the US government's ability to legally prosecute repatriated ISIS fighters.

When Lori saw the article, she immediately contacted the FBI, but Max refused to give her any information.

"I saw the news article but I can't comment on any of that stuff," Max replied.

Lori took a breath. After all the time she'd spent trying to rescue Sam, was the government going to cut her out of the process entirely? What would happen to Sam's kids?

"Has she been indicted?" Lori asked. Sam *had* been indicted back in March, for lying to the FBI when she told them she was going to Morocco for knee surgery, but since the indictment was sealed, the *Times* article was Lori's first indication that the Justice Department had started to move on Sam.

Max told her he couldn't answer any questions about prosecution or about potential custody decisions about Sam's children. Lori was irritated by his evasiveness; she'd passed on so much intel to him—the Abdelhadi contact information, the Florian chats, the messages from Sam—but now here he was, in the final hour, completely stonewalling her. Lori hung up frustrated.

While she waited for more information, Lori tried to continue living a normal life, traveling between Comcast gigs installing new systems, playing *Karaoke Revolution* with the kids, crocheting colorful blankets. But it all felt like she was going through the motions, like she was stuck in a holding pattern above her real life, which couldn't resume until Sam was home safely.

Over the next few days, Lori received scraps of intel from her sources that Sam was preparing to come home. The Red Cross called and told her that Sam should be arriving back in the US any day now; Juan told her that the Oklahoma FBI called him to say he should be in Indiana on Saturday, July 28, to pick Michael up. Still, Max refused to confirm anything.

Finally, on July 24, 2018, he called with an update.

"I wasn't able to tell you everything I wanted to tell you and I hope you understand that, right?"

"Uh, huh," Lori replied. "Oh yeah, I understand."

"So, I've done my best to do that, but I wanted to make sure you heard it from me, too, that [Sam is] in our custody, that the children are being very well taken care of," Max continued, his tone confident and reassuring. "I can't give you a whole lot of details on that, but I can pass a contact number for you, okay? I don't know what they'll be able to tell you. That's not my lane, all right? But I can do that, okay?"

Lori scrambled for a pen, a scrap of paper, anything to record the number.

"Okay, so a contact number," she urged. "Who?"

"For Indiana Department of Child Services," the agent said. "I'm sure you can make an inquiry [about the kids] that way."

Lori hung up the phone and stared for a moment at the wall, gathering her thoughts. Her sister was coming home. But so much, still, remained uncertain.

Chapter Fourteen

On the morning of July 23, 2018, Sam and her children were in their tent in Camp Roj when Kurdish forces appeared suddenly at the door. *Yella*, they demanded, gesturing for her to collect her things. *Get your stuff. You're going home.*

Sam shot to her feet and started throwing what few possessions she had left into bags: the kids' clothes, some water bottles, a plush navy blanket covered in snowflakes. It was finally happening. She was getting the hell out of Syria. Aisha and Ilyas could get the medical care they so desperately needed. Michael and Nadia could have toys to play with that hadn't been fashioned out of trash from the camp dumpster. They could all eat McDonald's! Immense relief washed over her, soon giving way to a dull anxiety: Where would she end up once they landed?

The Kurds took the family to meet a group of US military officers, who had flown in to take Sam and another American in Camp Roj, Ibraheem Musaibli, back to the States. They told Sam she was being arrested but didn't clarify the charges. She put the news out of her mind; she just wanted to get home. They didn't handcuff her, for which she was grateful. After everything they had already witnessed, her kids didn't need to see that.

Sam and the kids were herded into an armored jeep and evacuated to Kobane, a Kurdish village in Northern Syria close to the Turkish border. Before they boarded the military cargo plane, a male US military officer searched her, running his hands up her thighs and between her breasts. It made her uncomfortable, but what could she do—refuse to be searched, after they'd come all the way to Syria to get her?

Once they were on the cargo plane, the marshals gave Sam and the kids some blankets and then left them on their own. They hadn't handcuffed her the entire time she'd been in custody, and they let her roam the cargo plane freely. The plane was mostly empty, wide and with seats around the edges that faced inward. Netting that secured boxes of equipment hung from the ceiling. Sam took the blankets and spread them out onto the floor to make a giant bed for her and the kids. The five of them curled up on the ground, the youngest—Aisha, then barely a year old—nestled into Sam's chest. The marshals had told her that when they landed in the US, she would be separated from her children and taken to jail, so these would be her last few

precious hours with them. The sound of the cargo plane's engines was deafening, but Sam slept deeply and dreamlessly.

On July 24, 2018, the plane descended into the Gary-Chicago civil-military airport in Gary, Indiana. Samantha Elhassani, thirty-two years old, stepped onto American soil for the first time in more than three years. For Michael, arriving back in the US was like being in tight clothes and shoes all day, and then stripping them off to take a hot bath, he later told the BBC. In other words, it felt good.

All four kids were taken in by the Department of Child Services, and the Department of Justice transferred Sam to the Porter County Jail in Valparaiso, Indiana. In the mugshot from that day, Sam's eyebrows are plucked thin and her dark hair hangs around her shoulders. Her skin is pale and dull, and her blue-gray eyes are steely as she stares, almost defiantly, into the camera. Before Sam was released into the custody of the Bureau of Prisons, Max, Lori's FBI contact, took her into an anteroom for hours of questioning. She was exhausted, and the room was so cold that her nose ran constantly as she told them her story.

After the interview Sam was taken to jail and issued a chili-red jumpsuit, sneakers, and some underclothes. She was examined by a prison psychiatrist, which would soon lead to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and a cocktail of antidepressants and other drugs. Before she moved to Syria, Sam was already struggling with the trauma from childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence. In Syria—especially at the Black Stadium—she had experienced some of the worst trauma a person can go through, including rape, solitary confinement, and starvation. These new traumatic experiences only compounded the ones she'd endured as a child. Whether or not Sam would decide to commit to the rigorous internal work required to help her cope with her trauma would be her own decision, but suggested treatments for those who have been through similar experiences—both as children and adults—include eye movement desensitization and reprocessing treatments, medication, and trauma-informed cognitive behavioral therapy.

But because Porter was just a county jail and not a federal prison, it didn't offer robust mental health treatment, and Sam couldn't receive meaningful and sustained trauma-informed psychological care. At Porter, Sam entered a kind of limbo, waiting for her trial date. She mostly got along fine with the other women, except for one memorable incident when

she got into a physical fight with another inmate. When the other woman called Sam and her children terrorists, Sam chucked a cup of coffee at her head.

The jail didn't allow in-person visitors, but inmates had access to tablets to video chat, call, and send messages to their friends and family. Sam made frequent, meandering calls to her sister. Sometimes the sisters would chat about nothing—their family, Lori's dogs—or Sam would ask Lori questions about the status of her case. Other times they'd launch into the kind of hot-burning, quick-extinguishing fights common between sisters, this time over topics as dramatic and consequential as the custody of Sam's children or Lori's belief that Sam was responsible for much of what happened to her. When Sam realized she couldn't convince Lori of her innocence, she called her less and less.

Sam had initially been held on one charge of lying to the FBI, stemming from the lies she told her handler before she and the family left for Hong Kong. But on August 22, about a month after her rescue, the government indicted Sam on two new and much more serious charges: one count of conspiracy to provide material support to ISIS, and one count of aiding and abetting individual A (Moussa) and individual B (Abdelhadi) in providing material support to ISIS. The indictment against Sam stated that she "knowingly conspired to provide material support and resources… including funds and tactical gear" to the Islamic State, "knowing that the organization was a designated terrorist organization."

Because American citizens can't be charged by the American government for crimes that took place in war-torn nations like Syria, the indictment focused on Sam's behavior before she entered ISIS territory. The first count—conspiring to provide material support to ISIS—meant Sam was being charged for bringing money with her from the US to Hong Kong, as well as purchasing tactical gear in Hong Kong, with the intent of turning it all over to ISIS; the second—aiding and abetting two individuals in providing material support to ISIS—meant she was being charged with helping Abdelhadi and Moussa do the same. The US government had a mountain of evidence to back up the charges: They'd accessed Sam's Rocketmail, PayPal, and eBay accounts to show they'd been used to purchase tactical gear in Hong Kong (Sam claimed it was Moussa who used her accounts to make the purchases); flight records proved she'd taken the trip to Hong Kong; and interviews with friends and family showed she'd

lied about where she was while there. Though Sam had told friends she was relocating temporarily to Morocco, according to the government's sentencing report, "Financial records show [Moussa and Sam] bought roughly $97,000 in gold and precious metals from November 2014 through the time they crossed into Syria. Elhassani was also busy selling her guns, cars, and personal items. Elhassani cannot credibly claim that she was liquidating all of her savings and assets for a vacation or knee surgery in Morocco. And there is no plausible reason for anyone vacationing or moving to Morocco to convert their spending money to gold and spend thousands of dollars in flights to transport that gold to a storage unit in Hong Kong."

"Elhassani appears determined to sell a fabricated story about this case," the report concludes. "Her story is unbelievable because it is false. Elhassani did not liquidate her life savings, smuggle gold and cash to Hong Kong, and sell her home and personal belongings because she thought she was going on a second vacation to Morocco. She did not pull Minor Child 1 from school, lie to his father about her travels, drag him on two trips to Hong Kong, take him to a firing range and refer to him as a 'sniper' because she thought she was going to Morocco to get knee surgery. She did not tell friends, family and federal agents that she would return soon because she thought she was buying a beach home or moving permanently to Morocco. And she did not agree to delay her purported travel plans to Morocco and then go on vacation near the Turkey-Syria border because she thought she talked her husband out of joining ISIS."

The new federal charges against Sam were serious: The first, making false statements to the FBI, carried a maximum sentence of five years and a hefty fine. But the other two terrorism-related charges could come with a much lengthier jail sentence: Combined, Sam was facing up to forty-five years in federal prison. It was unlikely she'd serve that long, but other ISIS supporters convicted of similar charges had been sentenced to ten to twenty years in prison.

Sam was devastated. Since landing in jail, she had steadfastly maintained her innocence, but she had also started to accept that she would likely serve at least some prison time for what she had done. But forty-five years? It was impossible for her to imagine spending that long locked up. She'd be old by then, in her seventies. Her kids would be grown. Perhaps

she had done some terrible things, but always at the behest of her abusive husband. Why couldn't everybody see that?

Even though Lori believed her sister bore some responsibility for ending up in Syria, she promised to help Sam get the best lawyer she could find. That lawyer was Tom Durkin, a Chicago-based criminal defense attorney with a bushy salt-and-pepper mustache who agreed to take the case after hearing about it from Clive Stafford Smith, the human rights attorney who'd been helping Lori try to free Sam from Roj. Durkin had built up his reputation representing Guantánamo Bay detainees; after securing a forty-month sentence for another American charged with providing material support to ISIS in 2016, the *Wall Street Journal* named him "A Terror Suspect's Best Hope in Court." He would be Sam's only chance at getting out of prison before her fiftieth birthday.

Sam's legal team cast about for evidence to prove her innocence, interviewing her friends, exes, family members, and even Soad and Ayham, the Yezidis she had enslaved. But one family member's sustained insistence on Sam's guilt posed a problem for the defense: Lori. She was now in the position to testify in a trial involving her sister, just as Sam had done so many years ago in Yassine's domestic abuse case.

After Sam's return to the US, Lori had begun telling media outlets and even FBI investigators that she believed Sam went to Syria willingly, and that she should face legal consequences for her actions. "I want the best for her, but I think [prison is] where she needs to be at," Lori told the *Chicago Tribune*. "Sam needs help, more than just medication," Lori told me, for an article in *ELLE* magazine, in 2019. "She definitely has needed help for a long time." Lori believed Sam knew beforehand what would happen if she joined ISIS and that all of it—all of the violence, horror, and trauma—was ultimately her sister's fault. It was hard for Lori to think about, knowing everything that Sam and the kids had gone through in Syria. But no one was responsible for any of it but Sam.

When Sam's lawyers told her what Lori had been saying to reporters, she felt betrayed: She'd expected loyalty, despite everything they had been through. Lori wanted Sam to face the consequences that she had dodged her whole life; that's what Lori felt was best for Sam, but not what Sam thought was best for herself. Maybe, Sam thought, during all that talk of helping to rescue her from Syria, Lori had been concerned only about the kids. She'd been so focused on getting Ilyas and Aisha their passports, which Sam

assumed was part of the complex legal process that would eventually extricate all five of them from Roj.

But maybe it was more complicated than that. Maybe Lori wanted custody of the kids not just because she cared about their well-being, but also because it was a way to get back at Sam for testifying that Yassine had not abused Lori. As a result of that case, Lori had lost custody of Mac and Cassidy. That had to be what this was about, Sam thought. She returned to that same trough of resentment and sibling rivalry she'd fed from her whole life. Her anger at Lori felt familiar, and it distracted her from having to fully reckon with what she'd done.

As the weeks in jail dragged on, and 2018 bled into 2019, Sam's legal team faced the mounting evidence against her. Prosecutors had studied her trips to Hong Kong, the basis for the charges of material support. They had financial records proving her transfer of large sums of cash and gold to safe deposit boxes in Hong Kong, and her purchase of tactical gear. As they were charging her for conduct in Hong Kong, the circumstances for her arrival in Syria—and whether she crossed willingly or not—ceased to be relevant in the criminal-justice context.

On November 26, 2019, almost exactly a year after Sam escaped from ISIS, she entered the high-ceilinged courtroom in Hammond, Indiana, and, as Lori watched from the public gallery, told Judge Philip P. Simon that she wanted to take the plea deal federal prosecutors had offered, which reduced her charge to one count of concealment of terrorism financing, an offense that comes with a ten-year maximum sentence. In her plea agreement, Sam signed a document admitting to melting down gold and transporting cash to Hong Kong, knowing that Moussa and Abdelhadi intended to use it to join ISIS. She was afraid of facing a jury trial, of what it would do to her family. She didn't want to put her kids through all that: Michael might have to testify, and he had already endured so much. Besides, the statistics, she had learned, weren't in her favor. Prosecutors have never once lost an ISIS-related material support case.

When it came time for Sam to speak, the judge asked her to state the actions that made her guilty.

"Is it true that in around November of 2014 you were informed that your husband, who is Individual A [Moussa], and his brother, Individual B [Abdelhadi], wanted to travel to Syria and live in the caliphate and join ISIS?" her attorney, Tom Durkin, asked her.

“Yes,” Sam said.

“And is it true that between November 24th, 2014, and April 2015 you helped Individual A and B join ISIS by making three trips to Hong Kong?”

“Yes.”

Durkin continued. “And is it true that during the first two trips you transported more than $30,000 in cash, gold, and other precious metals from the United States and deposited them in a safe deposit box in Hong Kong?”

“Yes,” Sam replied.

“And when you did that, did you know that Individuals A and B had expressed an interest in joining ISIS and that Individuals A and B intended to use those resources, the cash, gold, and other precious metals, to help them and that you hadn’t disclosed the cash and gold on customs declaration forms?”

“Yes.”

“You did these things knowingly and willfully and with the knowledge that ISIS was a foreign organization involved in terrorist activities?”

“Yes,” she repeated.

“So, essentially, what you did is you—knowing that your husband and his brother wanted to join ISIS—you brought money to Hong Kong to assist them in joining ISIS?”

Sam nodded.

“Yes,” she said.

The next day, the FBI released a press release about Sam’s plea. In it, they stated that Sam knowingly and willingly exposed her kids to the atrocities of war with no fear of the consequences. Her actions and subsequent guilty plea, one agent said, “should serve as a strong reminder that these actions have serious consequences and will not be tolerated.”

Sam had allocuted, making a statement prior to sentencing in hopes of receiving a lighter sentence, but the government still pushed for the maximum on the remaining charge: ten years in prison. Federal prosecutors argued that “only Elhassani knows whether she did what she did because of her devotion to her husband, a warped sense of adventure, or because she actually believed in ISIS’s false propaganda about its so-called Caliphate. Whatever her motivations, they were not innocent or naive.”

The difference between a few years in prison and a decade meant the world to a mother of small children, even if either was a significant

improvement over a potential forty-five years. Now Sam would have to wait for the judge to decide.

In the summer of 2020, a few months before Sam was set to be sentenced, Lori's ex-husband Yassine was living in Washington State with his new wife, Rachel, young daughter, and Lori's kids Cassidy and Mac when he called to say that she could officially have full custody. Lori was shocked but didn't second-guess it—she'd been desperate to get the kids back ever since he'd moved them to Washington several months earlier, where her Indiana partial-custody agreement had little authority. This was her chance. As the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the US, Lori drove her champagne-colored Hummer from South Bend to Clark County, Washington, to collect her children.

Cassidy, now eleven, and Mac, nine, told her that Yassine decided that it was better for them to live with her during the pandemic. She could give them a "stable home," they said. But Lori knew there had to be something more to it—Yassine wouldn't give up the kids for no reason—and when she dug deeper, she learned that he'd been arrested again for domestic violence. A person close to the family said Yassine had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and court records show he was found unfit to stand trial due to mental incompetence. His wife got a restraining order protecting her and their daughter from him, and Yassine was hospitalized for several weeks. Before he was admitted, he sent the kids to stay with Lori, knowing that when she found out what had happened and filed for sole custody, he'd lose them anyway.

In late August, Cassidy and Mac settled into Lori's two-story Victorian, nestled in a historic neighborhood in South Bend. They signed up for school online and reacquainted themselves with Lori's three dogs, two cats, and two ferrets. Lori enrolled them in gymnastics and took them swimming at the nearby lake in Warsaw. They went on long bike rides along the St. Joseph River and memorized dance routines and grew tomatoes in the backyard, which Cassidy loved to eat straight off the vine. Lori's new husband, Hariss, came home from the road every couple of weeks to stay for a few days at a time, just like her dad used to do.

Lori had a good job with Comcast and was finally starting to build the kind of home life for her kids that she'd always wanted: stable, loving, with an emphasis on manners (they skipped the *Just Dance* songs with the

“cuss” words in them) but a larger emphasis on having fun (Lori and the kids frequently play-fought, throwing each other to the ground and tussling until they collapsed into a heap of giggles). But beneath it all she still kept her long tally of the people who had hurt her and the people she had lost, like Lanai and her parents, who still kept her at arm’s length because she wasn’t a Jehovah’s Witness.

And then there was her sister. Sam had been incarcerated for more than two years by then, and according to her legal team, she wasn’t receiving the mental or physical treatment that she needed to recover from what she’d been through. Dr. Stephen Xenakis, a retired brigadier general and doctor hired by her defense team, had diagnosed Sam with post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder. In testimony provided to the court by Sam’s lawyers, Dr. Xenakis wrote that the cumulative impact of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and the torture she’d experienced at the hands of ISIS had manifested as “debilitating symptoms and impairments” of PTSD and depression. Dr. Xenakis also noted that the medicine they put Sam on caused side effects, like weight gain, that sometimes made her stop taking it. In the spring of 2020, she’d also contracted COVID-19, and her team worried she’d be at risk for reinfection because of the unchecked spread in prisons.

On November 9, 2020, nearly three years to the day after she’d escaped ISIS, Samantha Elhassani was officially sentenced. She appeared in that same courtroom on the fourth floor of the federal courthouse in Hammond, Indiana, clad in a standard-issue red prison uniform with a cream-colored long sleeve shirt underneath and a black-and-white patterned face mask, mandatory in the age of COVID. She wore a pair of glasses, which she kept taking on and off, and her hair was long and brown and shiny and pulled back in the front.

Lori had been unable to find childcare at the last minute, so she couldn’t attend the hearing, but Sam’s Elkhart friends Cassie and Andria traveled two hours to see her sentenced, and her father, Richard, drove his pickup truck all the way from Oklahoma. He sat stoically in the courtroom, wearing a headset meant to make it easier for him to hear the proceedings.

Cassie and Andria were there for Sam, but they were also ready to put this all behind them, to have some form of closure. They were two working class, God-fearing women from Indiana; they’d never imagined they’d end

up here, outside the federal courthouse in Hammond, waiting to hear their friend's sentence on terrorism charges.

Throughout the hearing, Sam dabbed her eyes with her sleeve, as the lawyers bickered before the judge. When it was Juan's turn to testify on behalf of the prosecution, she stared straight ahead, seemingly too ashamed to even look at him.

"I do not care about Samantha," Juan said. He bounced his knees nervously, clutching a white medical face mask. "I think she was a member of ISIS, not a victim. You don't accidentally end up in Syria."

Sam blushed deeply, hunching her shoulders.

"Does Michael ever talk about Syria?" the prosecutors asked.

"Yes," Juan said. "He's told me stories of seeing his friends, children his age, blown up in car bombs; seeing Moussa attacked by a drone; seeing buildings exploded; people shot; ISIS shootouts with Americans…. All he really says about Moussa is that he was mean, and that he wasn't as tough as he acted."

"What about [the] defendant?" the prosecuting attorney asked. "Has Michael said anything to you about her?"

"That he doesn't want to see her or talk to her," Juan said. "And that he doesn't know when or if he will ever decide to."

Behind the defense table, Sam removed her glasses and put her head in her hands. She sat like that, sometimes propping her chin on her knuckles, until it was her turn to speak. Then she took off her mask and stood to address the judge. "I know you said that I'm not allowed to go off script," she started, looking back anxiously at her legal team. Mr. Durkin shook his head in warning.

"I just want you to know that I really hate that I have to read this, but it's a really emotional time, and it's probably better," Sam continued. "I am standing here before you today because I do want to apologize for what's happened and for what I've done and for the times that I've been able to make it different and didn't."

Then she apologized to Juan. "He trusted me to take care of our son, and I failed at that," she said. "And I hope one day that he'll let me ask my son for forgiveness, even if he doesn't forgive me."

Sam went on, apologizing to her parents, to the judge, to her kids. She apologized to the government, even to the FBI agent Max. But—despite

everything her sister had done to try to save her life—she didn't apologize to Lori.

Then Samantha Elhassani, the victim, the terrorist, the monster, the mother, received her sentence: six and a half years in federal prison and three years of supervised release. The judge cited Sam's history as a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse, torture, and rape as mitigating factors that led him to decide on a shorter sentence, a sentence that's less than half of the 13.7-year average sentence ISIS supporters typically receive in the US. Because she had already been locked up for more than two years, Sam would likely spend the next three and a half years of her life imprisoned. She should get out just in time to see Michael graduate from high school—if he lets her come.

What does justice look like for a criminal who is also a victim? How can Samantha Sally make things right with society, and how can society make things right with Samantha Sally?

Sam ultimately received a lighter sentence because her lawyers successfully argued that even though she knowingly helped ISIS, she was the victim of an abusive husband. It's a common line of defense for women who lived under the Islamic State. In 2013, a Texas-born Muslim convert named John Georgelas tricked his pregnant wife, Tania Joya, and their three sons into boarding a van from Turkey to Syria. Joya was fully unprepared for the reality of what awaited her. ISIS punished her because she didn't want to wear the robes, instead opting to wear pants and keep her face uncovered.

Luckily for Joya, she wasn't there for long. Because the Caliphate had yet to form and ISIS's control was patchy, Joya and her kids managed to flee Syria three weeks after entry, through a hole in the fence on the border. Unlike Sam, she was never charged with a crime, likely because she had not helped her husband arrange financial aid for the terrorist group. Sam, who crossed into Syria in 2015, two years after Joya, could not walk back across the border; ISIS control over Raqqa had consolidated, and she lacked the opportunity. Sam's defense team and supporters see similarities between her situation and Joya's: Both women were victims of the physical and psychological abuses of their husbands, they argue; the fact that one successfully escaped while the other didn't simply boils down to opportunity.

Only Sam truly knows why she decided to cross the border that night. If she did go to ISIS territory willingly, as the government believes she did, she's one of a significant number of women who joined ISIS of their own volition (one recent study estimates at least 20 percent of Western ISIS recruits were women). These women—like the former Kansas schoolteacher Allison Fluke-Ekren, and Umm Adam, who arrested Sam and took her to the Black Stadium—played a major and often violent role in the Islamic State; while some stayed at home, supporting the Caliphate through their domestic lives, including bearing children, others joined the *hisbah*, the ISIS religious police. Interviews of ISIS women conducted by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism found that women who joined the *hisbah* were responsible for "flogging, biting with metal teeth, and otherwise torturing others." Still other women were "trained as suicide bombers, to fight and use explosive materials and devices." Fluke-Ekren, who unlike Sam had been fully radicalized by ISIS's ideology and eagerly joined of her own volition, started a Women's Center in Raqqa, which "provided medical services, educational services about the Islamic State, child care, and various training to women and young girls," according to the indictment against her. "As the Center's leader, Fluke-Ekren also provided, and assisted other females in providing, training to numerous women and young girls on the use of automatic firing AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and explosive suicide belts, to defend themselves against ISIS's enemies." Fluke-Ekren was arrested in Syria and officially charged in January 2022 with providing and conspiring to provide material support to ISIS—the same charges as Sam. She pleaded guilty to one count of providing material support to ISIS and was sentenced to twenty years in jail, more than three times Sam's sentence. In her plea agreement, she admitted to leading the Khatiba Nusaybah, ISIS's all-female military battalion in Raqqa.

But even if women who flocked to the Caliphate didn't themselves commit violent acts like Fluke-Ekren did, many fought in the "social media jihad," disseminating ISIS propaganda and acting as digital recruiters for other potential jihadi brides. American and European ISIS wives were especially crucial in convincing other Western women to join the cause. Through anonymous Twitter and Instagram accounts, they put a girlish sheen on life in the Caliphate, painting it as a romantic place where Muslim women who had been rejected by men in Western society could be matched

with handsome jihadi husbands. Many of the European women who ended up joining ISIS in its later phase were successfully lured by these female propagandists.

Public perceptions about the inherent passivity and gentleness of women complicate the legal system's ability to hold these female ISIS supporters legally accountable, as does bias against Arabs and Muslims. Many American-born men who never traveled to the Caliphate but were charged with material support of a terrorist group received much longer sentences than Sam—despite committing similar crimes—and some American-born women of Arab descent, like twenty-six-year-old Hoda Muthana, are still in Syria awaiting repatriation.

Much like Camp Bucca, the US prison in Iraq infamous for serving as the birthplace of the Islamic State, camps like Al-Hol in northeastern Syria, where ISIS wives are being held together, are breeding grounds for extremist ideology. Many of these women were sent to Al-Hol after the SDF in March 2019 recaptured Baghouz, which was the last remaining ISIS territory. Though ISIS no longer controls any land, and its leader al-Baghdadi was killed in a US drone strike in October 2019, its brutal theology lives on; the violence and indoctrination that the women and children who lived under ISIS experienced didn't vanish with the defeat of the Caliphate. True believers in ISIS's doctrine, like many of those still at Al-Hol, could go on to join other terrorist groups—or form new ones.

The problem has already started to become a security threat for the Kurdish authorities in northeastern Syria. One specific area of Al-Hol, called "the annex," houses more than two thousand diehard foreign female ISIS supporters and their eight thousand children. The women have turned the annex into a mini Caliphate, using intimidation, manipulation, and violence to enforce the same arcane rules they lived under in Raqqa. They shout allegiance to ISIS at camera crews, throw stones at the guards, and commit violent crimes against anyone who disobeys them. Writing for the Washington Institute's Fikra Forum, journalist John Saleh called Al-Hol "one of the biggest mistakes after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" and noted that it is "a significant hub for ISIS operations and a breeding ground for ISIS's ideology."

Sam's continued insistence that she was never radicalized is one of the reasons her case is unique. By all accounts, she wasn't a religious extremist; she didn't want to wage jihad against the infidels; she wasn't even Muslim.

Sam was a hoarder of extreme experiences, and by the time Moussa proposed the move to Syria she'd exhausted every thrill she could find in the US.

But though the details of her story specific to ISIS may be anomalous, the rest of it isn't. If Sam hadn't followed her husband to Raqqa, her life would sound like that of a lot of undereducated and underemployed women across the world, women who have been duped and damaged by the people who were supposed to love and protect them, women who felt powerful one moment only to discover they were powerless the next. Like Sam, the vast majority of women who end up in jail are abuse survivors; according to the ACLU, 79 percent of women in federal and state prisons reported physical abuse and over 60 percent reported past sexual abuse—and many women are incarcerated for crimes they were coerced by their abusers into committing, or those they committed in self-defense. Others are charged for the crimes of their partners; Sam's legal team argued, in one example, that the case against Sam was really a proxy case against Moussa, who didn't live to be brought to justice.

Though Sam is serving jail time for smuggling money to ISIS, she has never been held accountable for the crimes that she admitted to committing in Syria—namely, participating in human trafficking. Yezidi rights groups like the Free Yezidi Foundation want Sam charged "for her role in aiding genocide, slavery, and crimes against humanity," and don't believe justice will be fully served until then. But because ISIS's territorial defeat makes it nearly impossible to collect the evidence necessary to charge Sam for those crimes, the US government has declined to do so—much to her legal team's relief. Her lawyer, Tom Durkin, has argued that "the events that unexpectedly unfolded amidst the chaos of war in Syria, and which Samantha could in no way foresee, should not be considered relevant conduct, much less offense conduct."

Sam may never, and probably won't, be held legally responsible for what she did when living under ISIS. Nevertheless, she does bear moral responsibility: crossing the border, participating in ISIS's economy, purchasing slaves—these actions had profound and damaging ramifications, for Sam's children and her family back in America; for Bahar, who went back to Sinjar to live with her remaining family; for Soad and Ayham, and possibly for many others all over the world. She gave financial resources to a bloodthirsty terrorist group that killed thousands; she enabled the rape of

two teenage girls; she *bought* human beings. Jail time won't help Sam make amends with all the people she hurt. It won't cure Bahar, Soad, and Ayham's PTSD, or give her kids their childhoods back, or repair her relationship with Lori. Sam failed the people she loved, but the truth is that Sam was also failed. The child welfare system failed her when the family member who abused her wasn't arrested and when her parents forced her to drop out of school in eighth grade, and when she married a predator at sixteen. Sam clearly pursued danger all through young adulthood, but the deck was stacked against her from the start. Her options were few from the beginning, limited by her economic circumstances, her lack of access to mental health treatment, and her abusive relationships.

Sam says she's ready to act differently. "I'm thirty-five years old, and I can't keep doing things like this," she told the court at her sentencing hearing. "I'm thinking of my future now and what I want to pass down to my kids. And I want to continue my education so even if I can't be with them I can, at least, pass something down to them to the point when I can be with them. And I want to be the mother and the daughter that I'm supposed to be to both my parents and to my kids. I want to be there for them the way that they have been there for me. And I realize it's going to take a lot of time and a lot of help on my part. There's a lot of therapy that I haven't received, and I am definitely going to work very hard on that and to try to change things."

Maybe Sam, cunning as ever, recognizes that everyone now expects her to accept responsibility and show remorse, and she's behaving accordingly. Maybe she's faking it, the same way she faked being a good Jehovah's Witness, a responsible mother, a trustworthy sister. Or maybe, through treatment, she's reckoning with the harm she's caused. Maybe Sam is finally ready to stop running.

Sam moved to Syria and lived under ISIS. Lori didn't. Even though it's her older sister's life that has the most obvious drama, Lori is perhaps the real anomaly: Despite her own history of physical and sexual abuse, she's built a stable life for herself and her kids and is making a conscious decision to break free of the generational violence that contributed to Sam's imprisonment. Though it's been more than eight years since her sister left Indiana for Syria, Lori will never forgive her for what she's done. Sam and Lori rarely talk now, except for occasional, surface-level catch-up conversations every few months. Sometimes Lori will send Sam supplies or

money in jail—a crocheted blanket, $20 for the commissary. They'll never be close again, the way they were when they were girls, chasing each other across the grassy fields of their grandparents' farm. But Lori will also never abandon Sam. At some point everybody needs someone, she thinks, no matter what they've done. And even after everything, she doesn't mind being Sam's someone.

In the diary Sam wrote in Syria, she ended with a section of letters to her family, including Lori. After the trial, while she was waiting for Sam to be sentenced, I came across the letter, and asked Lori if she wanted me to send it to her.

"I guess send it to me," she replied. "I'll see if it means anything."

In the letter, Sam wrote:

> *I remember growing up, dad and mom used to always say "Don't fight all you'll have is each other one day." You have always been there for me. I'm sorry I haven't been a good example as an older sister…. I have never deserved your dedication and now I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. Thank you for not forgetting about me.*
>
> *I'm sorry for not standing by you when you needed me the most. I have 100% failed you.*
>
> *I so wish we could all be a family again. I hope I can have another chance but that seems slim right now by the way things are going here. I love you Lori. Please kiss Mac and Cassidy.*

"Do you feel like it's sincere?" I asked Lori.

"Yes, I also feel like that sincerity loses meaning when I try to hold her accountable," she replied. "Then regains sincerity when I ignore her for a while."

This—the pull between resentment and forgiveness—is, perhaps, what it is to have a sister.

Epilogue

It's February 2020 in the Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq, Duhok Governorate, and the sky is a pale, whitewashed blue. On a rare sunny day in an unusually rainy season, we crest the hill that signals the beginning of the descent into the small western town of Khanke, the Tigris River flashing in the distance. To the southeast of the river is the beleaguered city of Mosul, still recovering from ISIS's brutal final battle less than three years earlier. To the southwest, 110 miles away, is Sinjar, where so many of the thousands of Yezidi refugees now living in Khanke once made their homes.

I've come to Khanke to meet Soad, one of the Yezidi women whose path intertwined with Sam's. After she was separated from Sam in the Kurdish refugee camp outside Deir ez-Zur, Syria, in November 2018, Soad was reunited with her mother Guri. Guri, Soad, and some of their remaining relatives have settled into a constellation of low-slung, one-room buildings on the outskirts of Khanke, along a narrow, paved road canopied with tangled electrical wires.

As I emerge from the car with my translator, Soad appears at the top of the street, wearing a deep purple sweater with the sleeves pulled over her hands, her long black hair hanging straight around her face. She's returning from a class about nutrition offered by the camp, and she has a plastic bag full of rice in her right hand. When she approaches, my translator, Hala, who works at one of the Yezidi women's centers in Khanke, greets her warmly and asks about her family in Kurmanji, a Kurdish dialect. Soad smiles, shy, and looks down at her sneakers. I introduce myself and hug her. She's just turned twenty, but she looks younger than I imagined.

Soad leads us into a labyrinth of small cement brick buildings, connected by tiny paths and squares of dirt yards. Somewhere nearby a chicken complains loudly. Soad's mother, Guri, ducks out from one of the buildings. She's short and a little stooped, with gray curly bangs peeking out from beneath her white headscarf. Guri smiles and hugs Hala, and then me, and tells us to make ourselves at home. Soad leads us to a one-room cement building decorated with colorful cushions and a TV playing Cartoon Network shows dubbed in Arabic. She chases some of her younger family members out of the room, switches off the TV, and settles cross-legged onto

one of the cushions, as Guri comes in with a tray of bottled water and Iraqi tea.

For more than an hour Soad methodically relays her story, pausing only a few times to regather her courage. She remembers the names of each of the men who raped her and how long she was enslaved by each of them; rather than completely disassociating from her trauma, she seems to have honed in on the specifics. It was her mind's way of coping: Focusing on the details that didn't cause her pain—names, ages, locations—kept her from ruminating on those that did. Soad's meticulous memory has made her an especially important resource for the NGOs who have come to listen to her story, collecting details about her captors with the hopes of finding and charging those who survived.

International human rights groups like the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) are working to investigate surviving ISIS supporters, like Sam, who committed assault and genocide against Yezidis and actively contributed to the slave trade. In conjunction with the UN, CIJA, an independent NGO, has interviewed hundreds of Yezidi survivors and dozens of ISIS fighters. The commission's hope is to amass enough evidence to help Iraqi, Kurdish, and Syrian courts build cases against ISIS fighters for war crimes like genocide and slavery. Testimony like Soad's is key to building those cases.

During our interview, Soad doesn't cry when talking about being separated from her father and brothers, who years later are still missing and presumed dead. She doesn't cry when talking about losing her virginity to rape, or being forced to convert from her beloved religion, or being physically abused and treated like property. But after more than an hour of telling me about the most painful experiences of her life, when I ask Soad about Sam, she starts to weep.

"I really want to talk to her and also I miss her and I miss the children," Soad continues, her voice heavy with stifled sobs. She hasn't spoken to Sam or the kids since they were separated in November 2018, and she says she thinks about them every day. She looks at me, her dark eyes swollen from crying, and asks me to relay a message to Sam.

"The only thing that I would like you to tell her is this: I will do whatever I'm able to do for you," she says. "I miss her. One day *inshallah* we're gonna see each other and as we told each other we will have a restaurant together. *Inshallah* one day she will come and see our family."

She is sobbing now, her chest heaving. She wipes her tears with the sleeve of her purple sweater.

“I really want to see her again.”

Soad isn’t alone in the depth of her feelings for Sam, despite the fact that Sam enslaved her. Ayham and his family also feel warmly toward Sam.

Ayham was seven years old when Moussa and Sam purchased him in Raqqa. By then he’d already been living as an ISIS captive for three years, after being captured in 2014 in the Iraqi town of Tel Banat. Ayham was in the hospital with his mother when ISIS came. She’d just given birth to his brother Anas. The fighters took Ayham and the newborn; his mother remains missing.

Before going to live with Sam and Moussa, Ayham was enslaved by a violent ISIS fighter named Abu Basir who frequently beat him, once so severely that it split open his scalp. Sam, he says, treated him like one of her own children, and he quickly became best friends with her son Michael. After their rescue from the SDF, Ayham went to live with his uncle, Tahsin Shahwany, in a two-story house with collapsing walls on the outskirts of the Sharya refugee camp, thirty minutes east of where Soad lives in Khanke.

With minimal resources, Ayham’s uncle struggled to reintegrate him back into Kurdish society. At first Ayham refused to speak Kurmanji and spoke only Arabic—a language imposed on him by his ISIS captors. Every toy he was given immediately became a prop in a jihadist-themed game. He flinched at sudden movements. When Tahsin paid $8,500 to a smuggling network for the safe return of Ayham’s younger brother Anas from ISIS territory, Ayham didn’t seem to realize they were brothers; the last time he’d seen Anas he was just a newborn. Now much older, the two brothers are still trying to get to know each other for the first time.

Bahar’s feelings toward Sam are more complex than Soad and Ayham’s. When I reached her by phone in the summer of 2021, she’d just finished her shift at a bakery in Sinjar, the hometown she returned to after escaping captivity. Bahar is the sole breadwinner for her family; her father and older brother have been missing since ISIS attacked their village and burned down their home, and her mother is disabled and can’t work. Now she picks up shifts at the nearby pastry shop when she can to feed herself, her mother, and her five brothers. Once Bahar dreamed of becoming a doctor, but since ISIS, the schools haven’t reopened and there are limited job opportunities.

She and her family live in a stranger's home—the family who owned it never came back to Sinjar, so they claimed it as their own.

Bahar isn't as effusive in her support for Sam. She acknowledged that Sam took good care of her—that time when the house was bombed and Bahar hurt her leg, Sam took her to the hospital and lied that she was her own daughter so that the ISIS doctors would give her the care she needed. "From what was visible, from what I could see, she was good to us," Bahar said through a translator. "She also told us her story and said that she didn't come willingly. Whether that's true or not, [whether] she had joined willingly or not, I cannot be sure."

Back in Sinjar, Bahar is consumed with finding her missing younger sister Eenas, who she has heard from other survivors has been thoroughly brainwashed by ISIS and is living in the foreigners' section of Al-Hol, unaware that she is Yezidi. She forwarded me a photo of Eenas, who just turned eighteen but in the photo couldn't have been more than fifteen, that a source sent her from her sister's time in captivity. In it Eenas beams in front of a red wall, her one hand propped on the bed next to her, her other hand making the number one gesture ISIS and their supporters use.

More than two years since her return to Sinjar, Bahar goes to therapy once a week and still grapples with depression and PTSD. Ayham also sees a counselor weekly and is focusing on maintaining his English skills. He recently finished out the school year first in his class. His success is due in large part to his aunt and uncle, who have provided a stable and loving home in which he can recover, and the Kurdish community to which he returned, which accepted him back easily and eagerly supports his recovery. But Ayham, too, still suffers from PTSD: When there are thunderstorms at night, he cowers in the corner of the room and cries—the thunder reminds him of the sound of warplanes overhead.

Soad copes by staying busy; if she sits with her thoughts for too long she can become catatonic. A female doctor in the camp named Dr. Naram has put Soad and some of the other survivors in a course about healthy eating and nutrition; the hope is that, with some training, they can take their knowledge about how to have a healthy diet and spread awareness around the camp, which will give them both a job and a purpose to guide their days.

Many freed Yezidi slaves despise their former captors, both for their terrible treatment and for the acts of genocide committed on their families

by ISIS. But more than two years later, Soad, Ayham, and their families—if not Bahar and hers—contend that Sam was as much a victim as they were; that she protected them from what could have been far worse treatment; that it's because of her that they're back home now. They lived through and escaped from war with her, developing an emotional bond under impossible circumstances.

Many human rights activists who work with Yezidis believe that some former ISIS slaves may suffer from a form of Stockholm syndrome, a psychological response in which captives bond with their captors. Like Bahar's sister, there are likely many Yezidis still living among ISIS supporters who have fully assimilated and may not even remember their former lives; others who had children with ISIS fighters are afraid to return to their homes, where their children will not be accepted, so they stay in the camps so they won't be forcibly separated.

Some Yezidi activist groups, like the Free Yezidi Foundation, argue that Sam should face legal consequences for her criminal conduct. In addition to pushing for criminal accountability for ISIS slavers, the Foundation has a headquarters in Khanke and provides services like work skills training, English classes, and health care to Soad and the other women there, many of whom were also sold to ISIS as sex slaves. Their work is especially important as ISIS works to foment a comeback in the region. On October 27, 2019, the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed in a US raid in Syria, and President Donald Trump declared the Caliphate defeated. But in the following three years, ISIS has slowly begun to regroup. According to a report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "ISIS and its affiliate militias have decided to revert to guerrilla warfare and working under a unified leadership, which has shown exceptional malleability, especially in Syria. They have been able to efficiently restructure themselves organizationally at the military, security, administrative, and media fronts." Sam's time with ISIS may be over, but the threat of ISIS's potential return looms large over the Yezidi communities she helped enslave, who—with fewer resources than ever before—are even more vulnerable now than they were seven years ago.

Still, Soad feels kinship with Sam. The evening after Sam received her sentence, I messaged Soad to let her know the outcome of Sam's case. Through a translator, I told her that Sam had received 6.5 years in jail, and

that meant she was likely to spend three to four more years in prison. Soad was devastated.

“I pray to God she is released,” she responded.

When Sam and the kids touched down in Gary, Indiana, in the summer of 2018, the kids were separated from Sam and taken into custody by child services. Michael was nearly ten years old; Nadia was six; Ilyas was two, and Aisha had just turned one. Michael’s father, Juan, took custody, separating Michael from his half siblings, who would stay under the state’s care until it found them a suitable home.

“The day I saw my dad, I was happy,” Michael later told the BBC. “Very happy.” One of the first things they did together that day was watch a Harry Potter movie.

Juan was living in Cherokee, Oklahoma, and working as a field specialist on oil rigs at Baker Hughes. He loved Michael and had always wished for his safe return from Syria, but having served in the US Navy, he’d been wary of circumventing government processes to get him back. Now that Michael was back in the States, Juan was committed to giving Michael the normal childhood he’d been robbed of before. They played video games and went fishing and camping together; one photo from November 2019, more than a year after Michael’s return, shows them posed with Michael’s arm slung around his father’s neck, smiling goofily in matching blue flannel shirts. Michael’s hair is long and swept messily over his brow, a far departure from the shaved style ISIS had forced him to wear.

Like Soad, Bahar, and Ayham, Michael is a victim of Sam and Moussa’s decisions, and the abuse and torture that he witnessed and experienced while living in the Caliphate will remain a challenge for the rest of his life.

“When [Michael] first came to me, he was very quiet, very scared, malnutritioned,” Juan said in his testimony. “His weight was very low. And he’s very standoffish from large crowds, and even peers his age, he doesn’t really—still doesn’t communicate with them or really have any social interaction.” He has trouble sleeping in the dark, Juan added, and always has to have the television or some kind of noise on in the background to keep him company. When there are going to be fireworks in the area, Michael needs advance notice. “If he’s in the house and just hears fireworks, he kind of goes a little bit into a panic mode, and he—

unfortunately, he probably feels like he's being bombed or that bombs are out there," Juan testified.

Perhaps the most difficult hurdle for Michael to overcome will be acceptance into an extended family who may not entirely trust him, fearing that at any moment he could turn into a violent jihadist. His appearances as a public face of the terror group, which made international news, will also complicate his recovery. Michael may face suspicion from acquaintances and friends as well as some members of his family. During his testimony, Juan stated that Michael isolates and avoids building relationships with other kids because he is afraid they'll discover the videos.

Though Michael is one of only a few Americans who were used in ISIS propaganda and subsequently returned to the States, studies of other Western children of ISIS fighters point to the difficulties that Michael may face. In one such study, published in an Australian psychology journal, researchers noted that children of ISIS parents often displayed "intense affects, efforts to ward off recurrence, behavioural re-enactment, somatic problems, emotional and behaviour deregulation, anticipatory anxiety and fear, a schematic view of a dangerous and distrustful world, dissociation, negative self-attributions, mood disturbance, misinterpretation of events and expectation of caregiver abandonment. A traumatised child may engage in 'excessive clinging, compliance, oppositional defiance and distrustful behaviour, and they may be preoccupied with retribution and revenge.' For children exposed to ISIS-related violence, the basic building blocks of attachment and caregiver relationships will be altered. Although trauma may not arise through direct violence, it can develop through an impending sense of doom, or being in a heightened state of continued arousal."

Though some local groups in Iraq, Syria, and Europe have cropped up to address the issue, there is no single, medically-agreed-upon framework for treating child survivors of ISIS. In fact, like Michael, the vast majority of child survivors aren't receiving any kind of treatment at all—and that in itself could be dangerous, according to another study published in the *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*. "Not providing interventions at all or not in the necessary quality or volume naturally raises the potential of prolonged and increased risk to the society at large beyond the prospect of extremist and terrorist activities, including general criminality, substance abuse and violent behaviour of traumatized individuals," researchers found.

Still, it's hard to deny that Michael is in a better place than he was a few years ago. He's improved since moving in with Juan—he's laughing more often, a noise that sounds like a gurgle caught in his throat. But he's still withdrawn, preferring to spend most of his time on the computer instead of engaging with kids his age. In an interview conducted with the BBC a year after returning from Syria, Michael said it was "sweet relief" to finally be back in the US. "It's happened and it's done. It's all behind me now," he said. "I was so young I didn't really understand any of it.

"I feel sad that they would do that to a child," Michael added. "That's how I feel."

In June 2020, nearly two years after Sam and her children returned from Syria and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, her parents Richard and Lisa drove to Indiana to take custody of her three youngest children. When they got close to the facility in Indiana where the kids had been staying for more than a year, Richard pulled the car over and sent Lisa into the gas station convenience store to buy a few snacks for the ride back. She emerged ten minutes later, her arms full of hamburgers, hot dogs, and nachos, more food than any kids could possibly consume. *What are you doing?* Richard asked. *They might be hungry*, she replied.

When the kids saw their grandparents for the first time since returning to the US, Nadia was withdrawn, but Aisha and Ilyas immediately wanted to be held. That Fourth of July, when fireworks lit up the Oklahoma sky, the two youngest stayed fast asleep, but seven-year-old Nadia started to sob, thinking they were being bombed.

"She got used to 'em," Richard later told the BBC. "She thought they were really neat once she learned what they were. And we heard a couple gun shots off in the distance, rifle shots. And she said, 'Now them are not fireworks, them are guns.' She knew the difference right away."

Nadia, Ilyas, and Aisha will live in the log cabin in Colcord, Oklahoma, the house where Richard and Lisa moved after Sam married Robert. Lanai, Lori's first child, also lives with them. She's eighteen now, with dark, unruly hair and angular teeth just like Lori's. She knows Lori is her birth mother, but she thinks of Lisa as her real mother, the one who raised her. Lori is okay with that, as long as her daughter is well taken care of. Because Richard and Lisa are still Jehovah's Witnesses, they're raising Lanai in the faith as well; Lori's excommunication means she has little to no contact

with her daughter, and to date, Lanai hasn't shown any interest in rekindling their relationship.

Richard is retired from his trucking job and much more mellow than he was when his daughters were young. In January 2021, Sam's parental rights were officially terminated, and for now she isn't allowed to have direct contact with her children, but once a week she calls home, and sometimes she can hear them happily playing in the background. It's a relief to know that they're safe, no longer sheltering from bombs in a war zone or dying from hunger in a Syrian refugee camp.

On February 11, 2022, Richard, Lisa, and Sam's three children with Moussa gathered in front of a TV mounted on the peach-colored wall of the cabin's living room. Beside the TV, a sign reading "Family" in cursive script hung above the doorway. It was a sunny winter day in Oklahoma, and the Sally parents were attending a Zoom hearing to formalize their adoption of Sam's kids. Since returning from Syria, Nadia, Ilyas, and Aisha had technically been wards of the Indiana Department of Child Services, and now Lisa and Richard would officially become their guardians. Lisa's sister Betsy shot a video of the proceedings on her cell phone camera. They each dressed up for the occasion: Richard in a navy suit and tie; Lisa in a blue, white, and black floral blouse; Nadia in a dress with red sequins and a black stole; Ilyas in a navy suit with a bow tie; and Aisha in a frilly pink dress with a smocked collar and a bow in the back.

Nadia sat patiently in a chair between her grandparents, as Ilyas and Aisha entertained themselves just off camera. After Richard and Lisa answered a series of questions—where did they work, how did you spell the kids' names—the judge officially issued the adoption decree.

"Congratulations, you are officially the parents of [Nadia, Ilyas, and Aisha] Sally," the judge declared, and everybody both in the room and on screen launched into a smattering of applause. When the judge moved to close the case, one of the social workers made a final request: "[Nadia] got herself a new pair of heels to go along with her sparkly dress and we want to make sure that she shows them off to us today for the adoption."

"Wait wait wait," the judge teased. "We can't do the adoption if we don't see the heels and the sparkly dress now."

"Stand up on the chair," Aunt Betsy instructed Nadia, and Lisa helped her climb up. The kids each showed off their outfits to the judge one by

one, and when the judge asked if they were happy the adoption was done, they all chimed in: “Yes.”

“Can we have some cake now?” Aisha asked.

In October 2020, thirty-five years after he and Dr. Angela Browne first published their traumagenic framework for understanding the effects of childhood sexual abuse, Dr. David Finkelhor released a new study. In the twenty-two years since the landmark CDC study on Adverse Childhood Experiences, medical professionals, social workers, and the public have become more aware of the impact ACEs can have on adults, and have taken a more proactive approach in identifying and treating them when victims are still children. And despite the fact that 80 percent of US adults believe that “the well-being of children has worsened over time,” Dr. Finkelhor’s 2020 research found the opposite: In fact, the incidence of adverse childhood experiences has decreased over the years. Trend data “from the first fifteen to eighteen years of the 21st century show declines in parental illness, sibling death, exposure to domestic violence, childhood poverty, parental divorce, serious childhood illness, physical abuse, sexual abuse, physical and emotional bullying and exposure to community violence,” Finkelhor wrote.

Rates of adverse childhood experiences have declined for different reasons; domestic violence, for example, has decreased due to “decreased domesticity, better access to domestic violence shelters, improvements in female economic status, and an increase in the average age of the population.” Incidents of sexual abuse, meanwhile, fell more than 60 percent from 1992 to 2010, due to “greater public awareness, stepped-up prevention efforts, better training and education, specialized policing, the presence in many cities of child advocacy centers that offer a coordinated response to abuse, and the deterrence afforded by the prosecutions of offenders,” according to a *New York Times* article about Dr. Finkelhor’s research.

Though the incidence of adverse childhood experiences may have decreased nationwide, some states lag behind others: Sam and Lori’s home state of Arkansas, for example, has “the highest number of traumatized kids than any other state,” due largely to poverty and the challenges posed by its rural landscape. (Fifty-six percent of Arkansas youth have experienced at least one ACE, and nearly 30 percent have experienced two.)

But thanks in part to Dr. Finkelhor's decades-long research on sexual abuse and ACEs, increased access to trauma-informed care is helping survivors of adverse childhood experiences cope more effectively, decreasing their risk of retraumatization. Incorporating knowledge of a patient's trauma—and how it affects their behavior, emotions, and reactions—into other therapeutic practices, like talk therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy, has been effective in significantly reducing symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

Though an increase in awareness of the damage of ACEs and the wider availability of trauma-informed care are both good news, what about women like Sam, who came of age before society had the tools and understanding to help them deal with what they went through?

After being sentenced, Sam was moved to FMC Carswell, a federal prison in Fort Worth, Texas, meant for women with complex medical and mental health issues. It's the only medical facility prison run by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and is notorious as one of the bureau's most poorly run facilities. For decades Carswell has been riddled with accusations of neglect, malpractice, and sexual assault. A 2018 inspection report of Carswell by the Bureau of Prisons found that women received only three pairs of underwear every six months, were frequently underfed, and were forced to pay a 30 percent markup to the prison for tampons and pads. A case manager at the prison had also recently been sentenced to twelve months in jail for sexually assaulting a female inmate.

When it came to mental health services, "63.6% of DC [Department of Corrections] inmates reported being 'unsatisfied' or 'very unsatisfied' with the quality of mental health care they receive at the facility, and 58.3% of DC inmates reported being 'unsatisfied' or 'very unsatisfied' with the wait times to receive mental health services." Furthermore, there was a high vacancy rate in staff or mental health services, which left many patients undertreated.

Carswell is a five-hour drive from where Sam's parents and children live in Oklahoma, but visitation has been postponed ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020. The outbreak has brought even more scrutiny to the way Carswell is run; within the first six months of the pandemic, 40 percent of prisoners tested positive for COVID, and six died. In January 2022, nearly two years since the pandemic began, Carswell was still

reporting the second-highest number of active COVID cases in the entire federal prison system. Sam has tested positive for COVID at least twice.

Sam was sent to Carswell with a scheduled release date of March 2024, with a possibility of transferring to a residential reentry center. Her program at Carswell was supposed to include intensive mental health treatment for her PTSD and depression, though, given Carswell's history and the results of recent inspections, she may not actually be receiving the supportive care she needs. She hopes that once she's out of jail she can petition the court to get custody of her three youngest children; that's legally very unlikely, but the outcome depends in part on her ability to secure a steady job and prove that she has learned from her mistakes. Lori is skeptical that she has. Sam has apologized publicly to her parents, children, and Michael's father for what she put them through, but she's never apologized to Lori.

When Lori looks back at the choices she and her sister made, out of necessity or fear or force, she sees one leading culprit: the sisters' upbringing in the Jehovah's Witness faith. The Sally sisters never learned to think for themselves, she says, which instilled an aimlessness that often led them to domineering men. Once they left the faith and no longer had anyone telling them exactly what to do, decisions as small as taking a shower or what to have for dinner seemed paralyzing. "Should I eat this?" Lori would wonder while peeling back the paper on a Jimmy John's hoagie. "Well, I don't know, because nobody told me to." Usually when children are given instructions, they're also given reasons *why*. But for Sam and Lori, even though everything they did was highly controlled, they were never told *why* they could or couldn't do something. The Sally sisters had been reared never to interrogate the world around them, never to wonder about the reason or cause or purpose of a rule or order. They weren't given the tools for introspection, or the ability to scrutinize motive or choices. It made going out into the real world exciting, yes, but also terrifying and overwhelming.

Though Sam spent the majority of her twenties craving freedom and adventure, her unquenchable desire for both eventually guided her back to the same types of controlled environments she'd grown up in: abusive relationships with tyrannical men, a life under fundamentalist religious rule, and, finally, to the ultimate controlled environment: prison. In the summer of 2023, Sam left Carswell federal prison and moved to a residential reentry center in Kansas City, Kansas, where she'll remain in custody until her

release date in March 2024. Now, she faces an America that is very different from the one she left in 2015. It’s been nearly ten years since Sam was free on American soil. What will she do next?

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Sam and Lori, and Soad, Bahar, and Ayham, for being so open with me and letting me tell their stories. Thank you to their friends and family for helping me fill in the gaps.

Thank you to Hawkar Sarhang and Ayub Nuri for being my fixers extraordinaire in Iraq; Khaled Ramadan for being my (very patient) Arabic teacher; Hala Haji, Pari Ibrahim, and the Free Yezidi Center in Khanke for their hospitality and translation help; Musaab Arezi for his insights into the mental health needs of Yezidi survivors of ISIS; Gulie Khalaf and Nibras Basitkey for their translation help and guidance on Yezidi culture; and Nafees Hamid for his insight into radicalization.

Thank you to my agent Anna Sproul-Latimer, for seeing this story's potential, and my editors at Scribner, especially Sally Howe, for making this book what it is. Thank you to my fact-checker, Merv Keizer, for doing his best to keep me from making a fool of myself. Thank you to all of the friends and colleagues who read the numerous drafts it went through, including S.J.D., A.W., K.S., and R.D. Thank you to the team at ELLE.com for being the best one out there, and to Hearst leadership for recognizing the importance of this story. Thank you to my family—my husband, Reda, my parents and stepparents, and all three of my sisters: This book is for you.

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Source Notes

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Scribner
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
www.SimonandSchuster.com
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First Scribner hardcover edition January 2024
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Interior design by Kyle Kabel
Jacket design by Tristan Offit
Jacket photographs: Girls Provided by the Author; Frames by Garrod Kirkwood/Millennium Images, UK
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Roy, Jessica, author. Title: American girls : one woman’s journey into the Islamic state and her sister’s fight to bring her home / Jessica Roy.
Description: First Scribner hardcover edition. | New York : Scribner, 2023.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023011337 (print) | LCCN 2023011338 (ebook) | ISBN 9781982151317 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781982151324 (paperback) | ISBN 9781982151331 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Women radicals—United States. | Radicalization—United States. | IS (Organization) | Terrorist organizations—Syria.
Classification: LCC HQ1421 .R69 2023 (print) | LCC HQ1421 (ebook) | DDC 305.48/420973—dc23/eng/20230324
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023011337
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023011338
ISBN 978-1-9821-5131-7

ISBN 978-1-9821-5133-1 (ebook)

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